

ANTIGONE



SOPHOCLES

A VERSE TRANSLATION BY

DAVID MULROY

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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Antigone

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For

Shawn Welnak

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Preface

I undertook this translation of *Antigone* with the same goal that I set for myself in my recently published translation of *Oedipus Rex* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2011). In both cases I've tried to do justice to the rhythmic character of spoken passages by using strict iambic pentameter while conveying the musicality of the songs by using short, rhymed stanzas. In *Antigone*, an additional challenge was posed by anapestic passages chanted by the chorus, often to announce the entrance of a new character. I have done my best to imitate their rhythm in English.¹

My translations are designed to be read aloud and with feeling. In fact, if there were a way to outlaw silent reading—to compel the purchasers of this book to read the text of the play aloud or not at all—I would adopt it. To encourage active, audible reading, I have included a guide to the pronunciation of names and unfamiliar terms. In this regard I owe great thanks to Erik Ebarp, who directed a fine dramatic reading of a draft of this translation by the Vanity Theater Company in Milwaukee, and to Professor Lauren Love of the Theater Department of the University of Wisconsin–Baraboo/Sauk County, who did the same on her campus. Both readings were immensely gratifying and enlightening for me. In rehearsals, it came as a revelation to this lifelong classicist that for many perfectly fine individuals, “Labdacid” and “Edonian,” to pick a couple of examples at random, are not household terms. The Guide to Pronunciation

(appendix 1) was originally prepared for Professor Love's actors with that fact in mind. As a further aid to non-classicists, synopses of other accounts of Oedipus and his family in early Greek literature appear in appendix 2.

In doing my translation, I constantly consulted two Greek texts and commentaries: the third edition of Richard Jebb's *Antigone* (Cambridge University Press, 1900; reprint ed., Bristol Classical Press, 2004) and Mark Griffith's edition of the play (Cambridge University Press, 1999). These works of exemplary scholarship removed much of the difficulty from the enterprise of translating.

The introduction that follows is designed to give readers who have little familiarity with Greek tragedy basic information that will help them appreciate the play in its various dimensions. A detailed synopsis of the plot is followed by a description of the historical context of the story and its Bronze Age setting and an account of the play's original production in Athens centuries later. Much of this section echoes the introduction to my translation of *Oedipus Rex*, since the historical backgrounds of the two plays are virtually identical. Next I trace connections between the story of Antigone and other Greek myths. After a sketch of the history of tragedy in Athens, I conclude with a brief consideration of the play's meaning. It lies beyond the scope of this book to analyze or even describe all the interpretations generated by the *Antigone*. My remarks are intended merely as a springboard for further reflection and discussion.

Note

1. Iambic pentameters are the ten-syllable lines normally used when characters other than the chorus speak, e.g., lines 1 to 3: "Ismene, sister—mine as I am yours, / has Zeus spared us survivors any part / of Oedipus's evil legacy?" "Chorus (chanting)" introduces anapestic lines. In the original as in my translation, they vary in length and are somewhat irregular metrically.

Their identifying feature is the occurrence of anapestic feet, i.e., two unstressed or (in Greek) short syllables followed by a stressed/long, e.g., the anapestic passage starting at line 110. “He entered our country aroused by the violent / dispute Polyneices began.” Passages that were sung in the original are translated into rhymed stanzas of various meters and printed in italics. Greeks themselves did not use end rhyme. The melodies to which these passage were sung are lost. All that is left of them are complex metrical schemes that are introduced in strophes and repeated exactly in antistrophes. I discuss my approach to translating Greek meters further in the preface to my translation of *Oedipus Rex*. The authoritative primer on Greek meter is M. L. West’s *Introduction to Greek Metre* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

Introduction

Synopsis

Oedipus, ruler of the ancient city of Thebes, unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. When he finally passed from the scene, he left four children behind: his sons Eteocles and Polyneices and his daughters Antigone and Ismene. *Antigone* is about the daughters.

After Oedipus' departure, a civil war raged between the followers of Eteocles and Polyneices. Eteocles gained control of the city with the help of his uncle, Creon. Driven into exile, Polyneices raised an army in the southern kingdom of Argos and led it against Thebes. The Thebans in the city repelled his all-out attack, but Eteocles and Polyneices killed each other in the course of the battle.

The play begins the next morning. Thebes is safe, and royal power has passed to Creon. Outside the city walls, Antigone confers with Ismene. She asks whether Ismene has heard about their latest misfortune: Creon has issued a decree forbidding the burial of their brother, Polyneices, because he was a rebel. The penalty for burying him is death by stoning. Antigone asks if Ismene will help her bury Polyneices, which is their sacred duty. Shocked and terrified, Ismene says that she could not defy the law. Antigone, disgusted, declares that she would not accept Ismene's help now, even if it was offered.

Summoned by Creon, a chorus of elderly citizens enters, singing of Thebes's glorious victory over the invaders. Creon arrives and repeats his proclamation forbidding the burial of Polyneices.

A soldier enters with news for Creon. Reluctantly coming to the point, he reveals that someone or something has sprinkled dust on Polyneices' corpse! The chorus wonders whether the gods were responsible. Creon ridicules the idea, blaming the offense on a person or people opposing him for financial reasons. He sends the guard back with orders to find the guilty party—or else. The guard is relieved to get away with his life: “Don't think you'll see me coming here again.”

The chorus sings an ode praising the ingenuity of the human race. Man traps and tames animals, builds shelters against storms, crosses the stormy sea. The one problem for which he has found no solution is death.

The soldier reappears. He is escorting Antigone and gleefully reveals that he caught her trying to bury Polyneices. Creon asks her whether she knew about his decree. She did, she says, but did not think that it superseded the gods' “secure, unwritten laws.” The latter, she tells him, “live forever. No one knows their source.”

Infuriated, Creon declares that he would not be a man if Antigone were allowed to overrule him. Believing that Ismene must have been an accomplice, he orders her arrest too. When brought before him, Ismene says that she is indeed guilty, but Antigone contradicts her, denying that Ismene has any right to share in her fate.

Ismene reminds Creon that his own son, Haemon, is engaged to marry Antigone. Creon is unmoved: “We'll find another fertile field to plow.”

The chorus sings an ode lamenting the troubles that the gods have piled on the members of Oedipus' family.

Haemon enters. Guessing that he is upset over Antigone's condemnation, Creon justifies it: nothing is more important than proper civic order, and one must never be defeated by a woman.

Haemon respectfully suggests that his father consider public opinion, which favors Antigone. Creon replies angrily that he alone is the city's ruler, while Haemon has evidently been enslaved by a female. Haemon, angered in turn, warns that if Antigone dies, she will destroy another's life. Creon interprets this as a threat and orders Antigone brought to him and executed before Haemon's very eyes. Declaring that that will never happen, Haemon storms out.

Creon again orders the sisters to be brought out and executed. The choral leader asks whether he really intends to kill them both. Creon says that only Antigone must die, imprisoned in a rocky cavern with just enough food to shield Creon from the moral pollution attached to killing kinsmen.

Led to her prison, Antigone exchanges songs of lamentation with the chorus. She also justifies her devotion to her brother: a husband or a child could be replaced, but since her parents are dead, she will never have another brother.

The chorus sings an ode about other heroes and heroines who endured imprisonment.

An old blind prophet—Tiresias—enters with dire warnings for Creon. The behavior of the birds and the appearance of sacrificial meat show that the gods are angry at his treatment of Polyneices' corpse and Antigone's imprisonment. Creon will pay for the corpse that he is withholding from Hades with a corpse from his own family.

Creon is shaken by the prophet's terrible words. After a brief exchange with the choral leader, he rushes out toward the countryside with his servants to bury Polyneices and free Antigone.

The chorus sings an ode invoking the help of Dionysus, god of wine and revelry. At its conclusion, a messenger arrives from the countryside with horrible news: Haemon is dead.

Before the messenger can explain how the tragedy occurred, Haemon's mother, Eurydice, enters. She has heard some commotion and asks what happened. "Go on," she says. "I've often heard bad news before."

The messenger is one of the servants who followed Creon. He says that they first stopped to burn what remained of Polyneices' corpse, then hurried to Antigone's cave. There they discovered that she had hanged herself and that Haemon had broken in and was embracing her around the waist. Creon asked him to come out. Haemon glared, spat in his father's face, and lunged at him with his sword but missed. Then he plunged the sword into his own chest and fell on the girl, splattering her cheeks with his blood.

At the end of the messenger speech, the choral leader notices that Eurydice has departed. The messenger goes into the palace to make certain that she is not going to do anything foolish.

Creon arrives, carrying Haemon's corpse. Laying it down, he bursts into song. His lyrical lamentation is punctuated by the comments of the choral leader and by the words of the messenger, who returns from the palace with the news that Eurydice is also dead. Creon prays for instant death. The leader of the chorus merely replies that future affairs will be in the hands of those responsible and watches as Creon is led back into the palace. (In later myths, he is denied the comfort of a quick death. Still ruling Thebes, he oversees the upbringing of Heracles and is finally killed by a usurper during one of Heracles' prolonged absences. The story is told in Euripides' *Madness of Heracles*.) As Creon exits, the chorus declares that wisdom is the ultimate source of our happiness and that it comes with old age.

The Historical Context of *Antigone* and Sophocles' Other Plays

The Age of Mycenae (1600–1200 BCE): The Historical Setting of Greek Myths and Legends

Greek myths and legends, such as those concerning Oedipus and his family, were passed along orally by imaginative storytellers for hundreds of years before they were written down. Hence they are mostly fictional. They do, however, have an authentic historical setting: the Mycenaean period, when Greek-speaking people made their first appearance in world history. Archaeology shows that they had settled in Greece by 1600 BCE. The first settlement from this period to be excavated was at Mycenae in southern Greece, whose impressive remains lent credence to the legend that Agamemnon, a king of Mycenae, was the leader of the Greek armies during the Trojan War. Other major settlements of the Mycenaean period were discovered in Athens, in Iolcus, which is associated with the legend of Jason and the Argonauts, and in Thebes, Oedipus' hometown. Heracles, the son of Zeus and greatest of all heroes, had a Mycenaean mother, but he grew up in Thebes.

The prosperity of Mycenaean Greece was short-lived. Archaeology shows that starting around 1200 BCE, the major settlements were destroyed and abandoned. Only Athens seems to have escaped. It is not known what led to all this destruction. Perhaps an economic collapse led to a period of chaos and pillaging. Whatever the disruption was, its effects extended beyond the Mycenaean world. Hattusas, the capital city of the Hittites, was burnt to the ground, and the Egyptian pharaoh Rameses III boasts of his destruction of a marauding horde, "the peoples of the sea," who had invaded his land. The city

of Troy, located on the shore of present-day eastern Turkey, just south of the mouth of the Hellespont, also seems to have been destroyed by warfare during this period. The legendary Trojan War was just one chapter in a long story of violence and destruction.

*The Dark Age (1200–800 BCE):
The Growth of the Oral Tradition*

The collapse of Mycenae was followed by what is called the Dark Age, although archaeologists and historians who specialize in the period dislike the term, which conjures up a picture of utter desolation that is undoubtedly misleading. There is evidence that foreign trade continued, and the Greeks established some foreign colonies at this time. Nevertheless, very few luxury items from this period have been found. The palaces were gone, and they had not yet been replaced by walled cities. The population decreased, and there is no evidence of literacy. The age was at least somewhat dim.

There was one undeniable bright spot. The Dark Age Greeks developed a rich oral tradition inspired by memories of the wealth and power of their Mycenaean ancestors. The tradition was embodied primarily in the songs of bards, who traveled from settlement to settlement singing in return for food and gifts.

Many of their stories were inspired by the Greeks' religious observances. Each locale had favorite gods and goddesses to whom its inhabitants prayed and offered sacrifice. The oral tradition sifted out the most important stories about the deities and wove them together into a coherent picture, which achieved its definitive form in the poems of Homer and Hesiod. There the most important gods are imagined as a large, dysfunctional family living on Mount Olympus and answering to Zeus, the supreme authority, and Hera, his wife and sister.

Down on earth, the cities of Mycenae and Thebes came to the fore as the great capitals of the heroic world of memory. According to legend, Thebes, in central Greece, was founded by Cadmus, an exiled Phoenician prince; Mycenae, in the south, was founded by Zeus's son, Perseus. Oedipus was the fifth descendant of Cadmus to rule Thebes. When he abdicated and his sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, fought over the throne, the strife unleashed by their struggle led to the destruction of Thebes by Mycenae and its allies a generation later. Thereafter Mycenae, now ruled by Agamemnon, became the dominant power in Greece and took charge of the great expedition against Troy. The best-known legends of Greece conclude with the story of that war and the travails of its heroes, especially Odysseus, when they finally turn toward home. Whatever its nature, the actual cataclysm that destroyed the Mycenaean settlements in 1200 BCE is not represented in myth and legend.

*The Archaic Age (800–500 BCE):
Enter the Polis*

Greece began to grow more populous and prosperous in the eleventh century (1100–1000 BCE). By the middle of the eighth century, these changes added up to a complete transformation. The Greeks increasingly came together into well-organized communities, city-states or *poleis* (singular *polis*). The polis typically included a walled city with a public space (the *agora*), shrines, and temples. The poleis were governed by codes of law that gave free adult male citizens fundamentally equal rights. Residents of the surrounding countryside were also considered citizens of the polis. Their inclusion was symbolized by temples and shrines built in outlying areas.

Increasing population led to land shortages in many poleis. The problem was solved by establishing colonies, new poleis, that quickly spread across the Mediterranean wherever there

were fertile fields, good harbors, and an absence of powerful rivals.

The sudden dynamism of Greek culture epitomized by the proliferation of prosperous poleis in the eighth century has never been fully explained. One contributing factor was the invention of the Greek alphabet, which also occurred around 800. One of its first uses was to record the poems that had taken shape in oral tradition, especially those attributed to Homer and Hesiod.

Those poems were the most influential, but they were by no means the only ones. Archilochus, Sappho, and other famous poets composed short personal poems; others turned to long, elaborate songs performed by choruses. Some choral songs were called “dithyrambs.” No early examples survive, but they are said to have been energetic songs recounting the deeds of Dionysus, the god of wine. Their narratives were broken down into exchanges between a chorus singing in unison and the leader of the chorus, who sang or spoke as an individual. According to Aristotle (*Poetics* 1449a10), Greek tragedy evolved out of dithyrambs. This origin explains the inevitable presence of the chorus in Greek tragedies. In the ancient Greek view, a tragedy was a special kind of choral song, not a drama with musical interludes added.

Near the end of the Archaic Age, Athens began its ascent to a position of cultural leadership in the Greek world. This was due in part to the efforts of the tyrant Pisistratus and his sons, who controlled Athens from about 561 to 510 BCE. Good rulers generally, they did much to beautify the city and patronize the arts. Among other things, they are credited with the establishment of the City Dionysia, a yearly festival in honor of Dionysus held in late March or early April. At the heart of the original festival were competitions for dithyrambic choruses. When tragedy emerged as a separate genre, competitions for tragic plays were added to the festival, which quickly became their

most important showcase. Although the dramatized stories were set in the Mycenaean Age, the way of life that they depicted bore an unmistakable resemblance to that of a Greek polis of the Archaic and Classical ages. Greek tragedy evolved into something like a mirror in which in the polis, especially the polis of Athens, examined itself critically.

*The Classical Age (500–300 BCE):
The Rise of Athens*

Events around the beginning of the fifth century BCE transformed Athens into a world power and inaugurated the Classical Age. Though Pisistratus' tyranny had been benign, his eldest son, Hippias, became harsh and oppressive when his brother was murdered in a private dispute. The Athenian nobles dislodged Hippias and his family with the help of Athens' great rival, the city-state Sparta. A period of political unrest ensued. The upshot was a revision of the city's laws that represents the beginning of Athenian democracy. Henceforth the citizens' assembly was the highest authority.

Meanwhile, Greek poleis on the coast of modern Turkey came into conflict with powers to the east. By 500 they had been subjugated by the Persians, who then controlled the entire Near East, from the Persian Gulf to Egypt. In 494 the Athenians assisted an abortive attempt by the eastern poleis to liberate themselves from the Persian empire. The rebels were quickly crushed, and to punish the Athenians for helping them, the Persian emperor Darius dispatched an army against Athens in 490. The outnumbered Athenian army stood up to the Persians on the beach of Marathon, charging them on the run and driving them back into the sea.

Ten years later the Persians returned, seeking revenge. They were led by Darius' son, King Xerxes, in person. The size of his forces was greatly exaggerated by the historian of record,

Herodotus, who writes of millions of Persian soldiers. In fact, there were probably something on the order of fifty thousand soldiers and a couple hundred ships. In any event, their hopes were dashed in a series of famous battles: Thermopylae, Artemisium, Salamis, Plataea. From Marathon on, Greek superiority in equipment, tactics, and morale was decisive.

Sophocles was born about 495 BCE. He was thus a young child in Athens during the battle of Marathon and a teenager when the enemy was defeated at Salamis. For most of the details of his life, our only source is an ancient anonymous biography, which, like others of its time, is far from reliable. Some of its statements are based on the assumption that events in Sophocles' tragedies reflected his life; others, on caricatures of him found in comedies. His birthplace is said to have been Colonus, a suburb of Athens (and the setting of his last play, *Oedipus at Colonus*). He is thought to have held at least two high political offices, serving a term as, in effect, the secretary of the treasury and then as a general in a war between Athens and the island state of Samos. These honors would make it likely that he was a member of the Athenian nobility and well-to-do by birth, although nothing is known for sure about his parents. His ancient biography paints him as charming, universally popular, and blessed with great musical talent; it states that he was chosen at age sixteen to lead the chorus of boys that sang and danced at Athens' celebration of its victory at Salamis.

Equally gifted as a poet and a composer, Sophocles was naturally drawn to compete as a playwright in the City Dionysia. He was first admitted to the contest in 469 or 468. Since only three tragedians were chosen, this was an honor in itself. One of his competitors that year was Aeschylus, the leading dramatist of the day. Sophocles won first place with *Triptolemus* (now lost), about the young hero from nearby Eleusis, the site of a great temple of Demeter, goddess of grain. The mythical Triptolemus spread knowledge of the cultivation of grain to

the whole world, flying from place to place in a chariot pulled by winged serpents.

Early in his career, Sophocles acted and sang in the plays that he wrote. What we hear about these performances suggests that his early works lacked the high seriousness of his later ones. All parts in Greek tragedies were played by males. Sophocles is said to have charmed audiences with his impersonation of Nausicaa, the princess who helped the desperate, naked Odysseus obtain the hospitality of her parents. In another early play he depicted Thamyras, a great musician who challenged the nine Muses to a singing contest. If he won, he would be allowed to sleep with them all; if he lost, they could exact any penalty they chose. Unfortunately, he lost and was deprived of both his sight and his musical ability.

Sophocles enjoyed a remarkably long and successful career as a dramatist. His ancient biography credits him with authorship of 113 plays. Authors of tragedies competed in the Dionysia with four plays at time: three tragedies and one “satyr play,” a comic parody. So it seems that Sophocles composed approximately twenty-eight such tetralogies, nearly one every other year from his debut until his death in 406. The same source credits him with twenty victories in the City Dionysia, adding that he sometimes finished second, but never third. *Antigone* is said to have won such acclaim that he was elected to the prestigious and important office of general for the year 440 BCE on the basis of its popularity. Among his also-ran tetralogies, on the other hand, was the one that included *Oedipus Rex*. It was beaten by the work of an obscure artist named Philocles, Aeschylus’ nephew.

Seven of Sophocles’ tragedies survive in their complete form: *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Electra*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Philoctetes*, and *The Trachinian Women*. These were probably the ones that were selected for educational purposes by scholars of the Hellenistic Age (323–330 BCE), which followed the

conquests of Alexander the Great and the extension of Greek culture throughout the Near East.

Sophocles' early life was spent in an Athens that was at the height of its power and prosperity. As time went by, however, the city's life grew more and more troubled. Athens had become an imperial power. With its seemingly invincible fleet, it secured the Aegean from the threat of a renewed Persian invasion. In return for this service, it exacted contributions in the form of money or men and ships (but mostly money) from the poleis of the Aegean and the Turkish coast. As time passed, the threat posed by Persia became remote and Athens' defense of Greek independence started to look like a protection racket. The Athenians spent the surpluses from its allies' tribute on the beautification of their city, including the construction of the beautiful marble Parthenon, the temple whose remains still grace the Acropolis today. When poleis attempted to secede from the empire, the Athenian fleet descended, besieged the city, and eliminated the dissidents.

The statesman who directed the growth of the Athenian empire was the Athenian aristocrat Pericles. Pericles was first elected to the annual office of *strategos* or general in 458 and was regularly re-elected for the next thirty years. His influence on Athenian politics, however, depended more on his reputation for honesty and patriotism and his ability to control the assembly through his oratory. According to the historian Thucydides, Pericles was virtually a one-man ruler.

Sophocles himself participated in the implementation of Pericles' policies. As mentioned above, in 440 he served with Pericles as one of the ten generals in charge of the war against Samos, an Aegean island that wanted to secede. Although he was technically a general, Sophocles' only involvement in the war seems to have been diplomatic, securing reinforcements from allies. Pericles himself handled the fighting with his usual efficiency. Given the high moral tone of his plays, one must

wonder how Sophocles felt about his involvement in Athenian imperialism.

The only independent polis that rivaled Athenian military might was the land power of Sparta in the south. Although the Spartans had enslaved their near neighbors, they were not otherwise an imperial power. They did, however, have mutual defense treaties with a number of poleis that chafed under Athenian imperialism. In 431 the Spartans and these allies—including Thebes, Athens' ancient rival—declared war on Athens. The Thebans had collaborated with the Persians when they invaded and had a long history of border wars with Athens. Sophocles and other Athenian authors were fond of depicting Thebes as poorly governed.

Led by Pericles, the Athenians welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate their strength. The Spartans and their allies needed to tend to their farms to survive and campaigned by choice only during the early summer. Pericles' strategy for dealing with the brief Spartan invasions was to abandon the countryside to the invaders, bring all the Athenians inside the city walls, which extended to the harbor of Piraeus, and rely on the Athenian fleet to keep the city fed. Meanwhile, the fleet would also make amphibious raids on Sparta and her allies, who would soon find such a war unsustainable and sue for peace.

The strategy had a tragic flaw. Crowding the entire population of the Athenian countryside into the city created unhealthy conditions. During the second summer of the war (430), a plague broke out, arriving at about the same time as the invading Spartans. Thucydides' history of the war between Athens and Sparta contains a vivid description of the plague's horrific symptoms and devastating effect on Athenian life (Thucydides 2.47–54). The illness was prevalent for two years and then seemed to die out, only to return with a vengeance during the winter of 427/426 before disappearing for good (Thucydides 2.47.3, 3.87.2–3). As thousands of citizens died, the Athenians

continued to implement Pericles' strategy. In 429, however, Pericles himself sickened and died. It is natural to assume that he was a victim of the plague, but Plutarch's description of his serene death (*Pericles* 38) is inconsistent with Thucydides' description of the symptoms. In either case, according to Thucydides the loss of Pericles' leadership led to Athens' eventual defeat in the war. It was the one contingency that he had not foreseen. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* begins with the description of a plague that seems to have been inspired by its real-life counterpart.

Once the plague passed, the war unfolded as Pericles had foreseen. The Spartans and their allies were eventually willing to make a negotiated peace, but the leaders who replaced Pericles persuaded the Athenians to fight on in the hope of total victory. It was only after ten years of battle that the Spartans and Athenians agreed to a cessation of hostilities in 421. That uneasy peace came to an end in 415 when the Athenians, still seeking total dominance, launched an all-out attack on Sparta's ally in Sicily, the great city of Syracuse. The ill-advised and mis-managed invasion ended with the destruction of the Athenian fleet in 413. The loss of its fleet left Athens in a desperate situation, more vulnerable than ever before to attacks by Sparta and unable to control its subjects. Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1419a6) mentions that a man named Sophocles was one of ten special advisors elected to recommend ways of coping with the emergency. It is possible but not certain that he is referring to the playwright, who was then eighty-three.

Sparta acquired its own fleet and renewed its attacks on a crippled Athens. The war dragged on at sea, with both sides, ironically, seeking help from the Persians. In the wake of a victory at the battle of Arginusae in 406, the Athenians once more had an opportunity for a negotiated peace and rejected it. The following year, their fleet was trapped and destroyed on the shore of the Hellespont by a capable Spartan general named

Lysander. He then laid siege to Athens by land and sea, starving it into submission in 404. Sparta's allies wished to level the city and kill or enslave its inhabitants. The Spartans were more lenient. They required Athens only to give up its fleet, except for a dozen ships, dismantle the walls between city and harbor, and follow Sparta's orders in military matters.

Sophocles died in 406 without seeing the end of the war. For all of Athens' troubles, he seems to have flourished in old age. He must have been around seventy when he wrote *Oedipus Rex*. Other later works include *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, and his last play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, produced posthumously, the story of the mysterious death of Oedipus. After long wanderings with his daughter Antigone, he is directed by divine voices to a sacred grove in Colonus, Sophocles' birthplace, where he disappears in a thunderclap. He has become a heroic spirit protecting Colonus and Athens from its enemies, especially Thebans.

We have a glimpse of the elderly Sophocles' wit and charm in a famous anecdote in Book 1 of Plato's *Republic* (329c). Getting on in age, he was supposedly asked whether he could still "be with a woman." "Shut up, man!" he replied. "Getting free of all that is the most pleasant thing in the world. I feel like I've escaped from a cruel, insane master."

Mythological Allusions in *Antigone*

Antigone was part of a great, living body of myth and legend, including much contradictory material. Although Greeks liked to believe that their myths were true, they tolerated many different versions of the same underlying events and even the creation of new events. The line separating true accounts from good stories was blurry. As the poet Pindar observed, "Charm has often managed to make the incredible seem true" (*Olympian* 1.30–32). In short, dramatists and other poets dealt freely with

traditional tales, accepting some, disregarding others, revising and inventing. Their audiences were well aware of this and enjoyed observing the relationship between a dramatist's new tale and the traditional material that it expanded on, revised, or pointedly disregarded.

Modern readers and audiences are in a different position. We know both too little and too much—too little because of our separation from the common knowledge shared by classical audiences, too much because the Greeks and their Roman heirs continued to embellish myths for centuries. Hence we not only need to learn the stories to which the dramatist actually alludes but also to disregard ones of later vintage. To take an obvious example, the sixth-century poet Stesichorus invented the story that Helen never ran away with her lover to Troy; rather, the gods sent an image of her to the doomed city for the purpose of starting a war. An interesting tale, but it would be a perversion to let it affect one's impression of Helen as she is depicted earlier in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

What follows is an account of the myths that were known to *Antigone's* original audience and have some relevance to one's understanding of the play—as well as some later developments that are best ignored.

Cadmus and the Foundation of Thebes

Antigone is set in the city of Thebes. Now a small town, Thebes was an important city-state during the Classical Age, a neighbor and rival of Athens. To judge by the myths, it was even more important—a dominant power, in fact—during the Bronze Age, until it was conquered by invaders from the Peloponnesus.

The legendary founder of Thebes was a foreigner, a Phoenician named Cadmus. The Phoenicians were a Semitic people, great sailors and tradesmen who had settled in present-day Lebanon and founded the distant colony of Carthage.

Cadmus' story begins with the tale of his sister Europa's abduction by an amorous Zeus, disguised as a bull. The god carries her off to Crete, where she becomes the mother of King Minos.

Dispatched by his father to find his missing sister, Cadmus consults the oracle of Apollo at Delphi and is told to abandon his search. Instead, he must follow a cow that he will meet outside the temple until the animal lies down. There he should sacrifice the cow and found a new city.

Cadmus does as instructed. While fetching water to be used in the ritual, he is attacked by a huge, ferocious serpent sacred to Ares, the god of war. He kills the monster with a sword and, at Ares' suggestion, plants its teeth in the ground. The moment he does so, fierce soldiers emerge from the earth. Cadmus throws a rock at them in fear. Unaware of where the rock came from, the earth-born soldiers turn on each other and fight until only five are left. They are the original Spartoi or "sown men," embodiments of the ferocity of Ares' serpent. Hence the Thebans refer to their enemies as "the serpent's foe" and to their countryside as "the raging serpent's field."

There is no continuous account of Cadmus' founding of Thebes in pre-Classical sources like Homer or Hesiod. However, an Athenian scholar named Pherecydes compiled a ten-volume encyclopedia of myth early in the fifth century. Although that work has been lost, "fragments" in the form of quotations from other, later authors do survive and these show that he recounted the story of Cadmus in its traditional form. Hence it was known to Sophocles and his audience.¹

Thebes and Dionysus

Antigone's first and last choral odes address Dionysus, a.k.a. Bacchus, and refer to his close connection with Thebes. He is the god of wine and revelry, typically accompanied by female

devotees known as Bacchantes or Maenads (“raging women”). The story behind Thebes’s special connection with Dionysus starts with another of Zeus’s love affairs. This time the object of his affection is Semele, Cadmus’ daughter, a Theban princess. The story seems to have been known early in the fifth century, since it is referenced in Pindar’s Second Olympian Ode (22–27), written in 476 BCE. The pregnant Semele is tricked by Zeus’s jealous wife, Hera, into making the fatal request that her lover visit her in his divine form. The god comes to Semele in the form of lightning, and she is incinerated. Hence the chorus refers to Dionysus’ “stricken mother.” The story has a happy ending, however. Zeus saves the embryonic Dionysus, sewing him into his own thigh, and then giving birth to him. Better still, Semele is brought back to life and made immortal. The story is mentioned in Hesiod’s *Theogony* (940–942).

The worship of Dionysus is depicted in myth as controversial, since it involves uninhibited celebrations dominated by women. In several stories rulers are punished for attempting to disrupt Bacchic rites. *Antigone*’s chorus alludes to the story of Lycurgus, son of Dryas, a Thracian² or “Edonian” king (955–965): “Edonian Dryas’s hot-tempered child.” While the motherless Dionysus is being raised by nymphs on the mythical Mount Nysa, Lycurgus attacks the terrified child and his nurses, driving them into the sea with an ox-goad. In the *Iliad* (6.130–143), the gods punish him by blinding him and making sure that he dies young. Other sources cite worse punishments, including a version in which he goes mad and kills his own son with an ax.

In this case Sophocles engages in revisionism. He has his chorus say that Lycurgus was placed in a “prison of stone” for taunting Dionysus. In doing so, they make his situation parallel to Antigone’s and seem to imply that she brought Creon’s wrath upon herself by speaking to him contemptuously.

*The Other Foundation of Thebes:
Amphion and Zethus*

Incompatible stories circulated about the foundation of Thebes. From the earliest times, some myths said that it was founded not by Cadmus but by a son of Zeus named Amphion and his brother Zethus. Amphion was a great lyre player. In a story that goes back at least to Hesiod, he is said to have used his lyre to build the walls of Thebes, enchanting the boulders in the rocky countryside so that they leapt up and danced into position. The walls he built were famous for having seven gates (see *Iliad* 4.406).

To unite the contradictory tales of Cadmus and Amphion, some storytellers asserted that the city established by Amphion and Zethus was leveled by enemies and then rebuilt by Cadmus. Others imagined a period in which Cadmus' rightful heir was too young to rule and the city was taken over by regents descended from the Spartoi until the ascendancy of Amphion and Zethus. In such accounts Cadmus fortified only the Theban acropolis, its inner city, which was known as Cadmeia, while construction of the outer walls is credited to Amphion. In *Antigone* a messenger acknowledges both stories by addressing the Thebans as "Amphion's neighbors—Cadmus's as well" (1153).

The mother of Amphion and Zethus was a Theban princess, Antiope. Eurpides' melodramatic tragedy of the same name—now lost—told how the brothers were exposed at birth but rescued. They grow to adulthood while their mother is imprisoned and tormented by the regent Lycus and his evil consort Dirce. In the end, mother and sons are reunited. The sons oust Lycus, take power for themselves, and execute Dirce by tying her to a bull. Her mangled body is transformed into a spring that issues in a stream also known as Dirce. It is often

mentioned together with the Ismenus when Thebes's landscape is invoked. Euripides' tragedy, however, was probably written years after *Antigone*. One does not know what associations, if any, Dirce's name or the phrase "Dircean stream" had for Sophocles' audience.

"Queen Niobe's Unkind Demise"

Unlike Oedipus' sons, Zethus and Amphion rule Thebes in joint harmony. (There were stories of turmoil in Zethus' family life, but they are not alluded to in *Antigone*.) Zethus dies before Amphion, who is left to govern alone with his wife, the ill-fated Queen Niobe, a daughter of the famous sinner Tantalus.³ Like her father, Niobe hails from Lydia in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). She bears Amphion a large number of children, twenty in some accounts, twelve or fourteen in others.

The rest of the story first appears in Homer's *Iliad* (24.602–620), where Achilles urges the grieving Priam to set his sorrows aside and have something to eat—because even Niobe took time to eat despite her sorrows. She had borne six daughters and six sons and boasted that she was superior to the goddess Leto, who had only two children. Leto's children, however, were the great gods Apollo and Artemis. They took umbrage at Niobe's boasting and shot down all twelve of her children. She returned to her home on Mount Sipylus, where she was changed to stone and in that form broods eternally over her sorrows.

The famous story may have been inspired by a natural formation, the Weeping Rock on Mount Sipylus (modern Spil, near Manisa, Turkey). On the other hand, the interpretation of the rock's appearance may have been inspired by the myth.

The implausible detail of Niobe's meal is clearly meant to have been invented by Achilles to suit his immediate purposes.

The rest of his narration shows that the essential features of Niobe's myth—her many children, her boasting, the slaughter, her transformation into stone—were well known from the earliest times.

Both Aeschylus and Sophocles composed dramas, now lost, about Niobe. Not enough survives to describe in detail what sort of spin they put on the story, but Sophocles' version actually brought Artemis and Apollo on stage in the act of hunting down and killing Niobe's daughters. A papyrus fragment (Fragment 441a) preserves four lines in which Apollo encourages Artemis to shoot down one of Niobe's daughters:

You see the panic-stricken little girl
inside the cellar, crouching down beside
the storage bins, alone and trembling, won't
you aim an arrow there before she gets away?

(my translation)

A fragmentary synopsis of the play reveals that Apollo killed Amphion when he took up arms against the gods for killing his wife and children. It is obvious that Sophocles' version of the play emphasized the outrageous cruelty of the gods implicit in the myth.

In *Antigone*, the song that the heroine sings when facing imminent death begins by invoking Niobe's story: "I've heard about the Tantalid / queen Niobe's unkind demise" (823). Antigone compares herself to Niobe ostensibly because she too is heading toward eternal rest, enclosed in a stony cave rather than being turned to stone. We are free to imagine other points of similarity and contrast between the two situations. It might be thought that Antigone—like Niobe, like Lycurgus—is too outspoken for her own good. Yet the reference also serves as a muted complaint about the cruelty of the gods who sanction such suffering.

Laius' Sin

Sources vary on exactly where Amphion and Zethus belong in the timeline of Theban rulers. In the account that Sophocles seems to have had in mind, Cadmus was succeeded by a son named Polydorus, and he, in turn, by his son Labdacus. The latter is remembered chiefly through the use of the patronymic “Labdacid” to denote the royal family of Thebes.

When Labdacus died, his son, Laius, was not yet old enough to rule. It was then that power passed temporarily from Cadmus’ descendants into the hands of regents descended from the Spartoi. When Amphion died, Laius returned to Thebes and assumed royal power.

Laius was said to have lived with Pelops in the kingdom of Elis before returning to Thebes. Concerning his time there we have only one story, which derives either from a play by Aeschylus written before *Antigone* or a play by Euripides written after it; no one knows which. According to it, Laius seduced Pelops’ young son Chrysippus, who later killed himself in shame. Later sources make Pelops’ curse and the gods’ anger at Laius’ offense the reason he was doomed to be killed by his own son, Oedipus. There is no evidence in his surviving plays that Sophocles incorporated Laius’ pederasty into his own account of the family’s crimes and punishments.

Various Oedipuses

Several versions of the history of Laius, Oedipus, and sons were in circulation when Sophocles wrote *Antigone*. Today the canonical account is that written by Sophocles himself years after *Antigone*—in the *Oedipus Rex* of the late 420s and *Oedipus at Colonus*, presented after the playwright’s death in 406. To see *Antigone* through the eyes of the original audience,

it is necessary to disregard the famous prequels that Sophocles was later to write.

Antigone's original audience knew the story of Oedipus and his children chiefly through two epic poems, now lost, the *Oedipodeia* and the *Thebaid*, and a trilogy by Aeschylus: *Laius*, *Oedipus*, and *Seven against Thebes*, of which the last alone survives. There was also a long reference to Oedipus' story in the *Odyssey* (II.271–280).

The sources seem to have agreed that Oedipus killed his father and married his mother, and also that he saved Thebes from the Sphinx and then ruled there. Homer's summary says that Oedipus' crimes were brought to light quickly after his ascension, not necessarily through his own efforts, and that he nevertheless clung to power for some time, although his wife-mother committed suicide. In the *Oedipodeia*, Oedipus' four children were the products of a previous, non-incestuous union with a woman named Euryganeia. In all sources, the culminating evil was that he cursed his sons so that they killed each other in battle over their inheritance. In the *Thebaid* he cursed them once because they served him with Cadmus' drinking cups and again for sending him the wrong cut of meat. The notion that he was driven into exile and cursed his sons for that reason was evidently a later invention by Sophocles for use in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Antigone and Ismene are mentioned in the epics, but there is no evidence of Antigone's heroism. The only mention of the sisters that can be traced to a pre-Sophoclean source tells us nothing about Antigone beyond her name.⁴ About Ismene we learn the strange fact that she was killed by Tydeus, one of the seven captains of Polyneices' army. Since Tydeus was one of the Argives killed during their assault on Thebes, according to this account Ismene would have died before Eteocles and Polyneices killed each other.

Antigone quickly resets the basic situation. Ismene is alive and well. Her words (49–54) demand the inference that she, Antigone, Polyneices, and Eteocles are Oedipus’ children by his “mother-wife.” She also conveys the fact that when Oedipus uncovered his own sins, he blinded himself, and his mother-wife hanged herself. Other events are left to our imagination. We learn that Oedipus has died only when Antigone mentions bathing his corpse. A statement by Creon (167–169) implies that Oedipus ruled until his death, rather than retiring when his crimes were revealed.

Sophocles says little about the strife between Polyneices and Eteocles. Evidently, Eteocles and Creon gained control of the city and excluded Polyneices from power. There is no mention of Oedipus’ curse or what his sons did to offend him. As to the justice of the case, Polyneices’ name means “much strife”; Eteocles’, “real glory.” Hence it seems that in the original story Eteocles was the rightful ruler, but subsequent storytellers were not obliged to adhere to that view. The chorus may give us a clue when it refers to the strife that Polyneices began, but they are in the city now controlled by Creon and would naturally adopt his point of view. The *Thebaid* seems to have had a complicated account of how Polyneices put himself in position to lead an army against Thebes by marrying the daughter of Adrastus, king of Argos, and gaining his father-in-law’s support. In *Antigone* that whole story is reduced to Antigone’s reference to her brother’s marriage as a source of strife.⁵

Sophocles leaves it unclear exactly who has been in charge of Thebes. Creon talks and is treated like a well-established ruler. For example, Haemon speaks (690–691) of the citizens’ habitual reticence in his presence. On the other hand, Creon says (174) that he inherited power from Eteocles upon his death. If so, he has been king for only a few hours, and his opening speech is his first public appearance in that role. Here logic is simply overridden by dramatic convenience.

When Sophocles was writing *Antigone*, the canonical account of the war between Polyneices and Eteocles was Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*. At the heart of that play is a long passage in which a scout describes the arms of the seven captains who are preparing to attack Thebes's seven gates. Several have boastful mottoes emblazoned on their shields in gold. Most memorable is the giant warrior Capaneus (425–434).

His boasting's on a superhuman scale.
He says he'll sack the city if the gods
allow, or even if they don't, and Zeus
can shake the ground with hostile force. His bolts
and lightning feel like rays of warming sun.
He shield depicts a naked man who holds
a blazing torch. Its golden letters say,
"I'll burn the city down!"

(my translation)

Eteocles predicts (444–445) that Capaneus will be struck down by Zeus's lightning bolt, not just a picture of one.

In the opening song of *Antigone*, a warrior resembling Capaneus seems to stand for the whole Argive army. He is struck by lightning as he mounts the city wall, falling to earth with a victory cry stuck in his throat. He epitomizes one of the play's dominant themes: the dangers of boastfulness.

Another allusion to *Seven* or another work cannot be fully explained. In Aeschylus' play, the scout reveals (473) that the city's third gate is guarded by "Megareus, son of Creon," who will either conquer his adversary or die trying. Nothing more is said of him specifically. At the end, the only defender reported killed is Eteocles himself. At the end of *Antigone* (1304), the palace messenger describing Eurydice's suicide says that she lamented "dead Megareus's fate" as well as Haemon's and said that Creon was responsible for both. The only surviving clue to the rest of the story occurs in Euripides' later play, *The*

Phoenician Women. There Creon has a son named Menoeceus after his grandfather. Tiresias predicts that the city will be saved only if Menoeceus sacrifices himself. Creon urges his son to flee, but he is not the sort to do anything so cowardly. He sneaks away to a tower and cuts his throat (*The Phoenician Women* 1091–1092). It sounds as though Euripides' version of the event is a revision of the account that Sophocles had in mind.

The Burial Controversy

The first account in which the burial of the fallen seven became an issue was apparently a play by Aeschylus, *Eleusinians*.⁶ According to Plutarch it depicted the victorious Thebans first denying burial to their fallen adversaries, but then relenting thanks to the diplomatic efforts of Theseus, king of Athens. The notion that Creon is denying burial not just to Polyneices but to his Argive comrades is mentioned in passing in *Antigone*. Does the chastened Creon relent in that matter too? It is an odd loose end. In any event, all the evidence suggests that Antigone's heroic attempt to bury her brother was simply invented by Sophocles.

Tiresias' Magic Walking Stick

Another adaptation of the mythical tradition in *Antigone* is illustrative of Sophocles' tendency to make myth somewhat more realistic.

Tiresias, an old, blind prophet, first appears in Homer's *Odyssey* when Odysseus visits him in the land of the dead, seeking advice on getting home. Tiresias knows all. He is said to be the only ghost in the land of the dead who retains unimpaired consciousness. We probably owe the standard account of the origin of Tiresias' prophetic power to Hesiod's *Melampodia*, a

lost work that contained the stories of all the great seers. Once upon a time, Tiresias was changed into a woman when he struck two copulating serpents with his walking stick. His masculinity was restored years later when he repeated the action. Thereafter Zeus and Hera quarreled over whether men or women got more pleasure from sex and decided to consult Tiresias. He angered Hera by saying women got more pleasure, and she punished him with blindness. Zeus could not undo her action but compensated Tiresias with the gift of prophecy.

Around the time *Antigone* was written, the Athenian mythographer Pherecydes recorded a different version in which Athena blinded Tiresias because he accidentally saw her bathing. His mother, Chariclo, happened to be Athena's friend and begged the goddess for mercy. Athena would not restore Tiresias' sight but gave him the ability to understand the speech of birds and a cane that enabled him to walk from place to place as well as a sighted person.

There are no allusions in *Antigone* to the fantastical accounts of the origins of Tiresias' powers, but Sophocles seems to have had Pherecydes' version in mind. The prophet describes his interpretation of the sounds of birds at some length and also dwells on the fact that he needed to be guided by a slave boy to make his way to Creon. The slave boy is his magic walking stick.

Haemon, "Most Beautiful and Desirable"

The engagement of Antigone and Haemon is another likely invention by Sophocles and would have come as a surprise to the original audience. Haemon was known to readers of the *Oedipodeia* as a victim of the Sphinx. His story touches on an aspect of the Sphinx's character that is played down by Sophocles but was well known to his audience. The Sphinx was generally depicted as a murderous sexual predator whose victims

were handsome boys. In art, they are almost always naked. In the *Oedipodeia*, Haemon seems to have fallen prey to her because of his good looks. The only two surviving lines of the poem inform us that the Sphinx seized and devoured “even the most beautiful and desirable of them all, the dear son of blameless Creon, noble Haemon.”

The Ancient Greek Theater

Choruses and Education

Elementary education in ancient Greece meant learning the alphabet, playing the lyre and singing, and gymnastics: reading and writing, music, and physical education in our terms. In addition, competitive choral performances for groups of children and adults were held year round at religious festivals and on other occasions. Though not formally part of the curriculum, competent participation in choral performances through both singing and dancing was the proof that one was well educated. In *Laws* (653e–654a), for example, Plato argues that rhythm and melody are what distinguish human beings from animals, adding that a man who is unable to perform in a chorus is uneducated by definition.

Participation in choral performances was a regular feature of upper-class life in archaic and classical Greece. Not only did most religious festivals include choral performances, but choruses of boys and girls performed at weddings and in ceremonies honoring victors at the Olympic games and other competitions. Choral performances at religious festivals were naturally taken the most seriously. Choruses typically had fifty members. The cost of training and costumes was borne by a *choregus*, a wealthy citizen appointed for the task by a magistrate. Despite the cost, *choregi* seem to have participated willingly,

since great prestige came from financing a winning chorus. The prize in Athens was a bronze tripod. The famous choregic monument of Lysicrates is proof of the importance attached by some to choral victories. It is a graceful, marble rotunda, twenty feet high, featuring a half-dozen Corinthian columns and a conical roof where Lysicrates' victory tripod originally stood. A frieze carved in relief shows the god Dionysus reclining with a pet panther and a scene from his rich mythology: the transformation into dolphins of the pirates who had attempted to kidnap him. The inscription tells us that Lysicrates erected the monument to commemorate a victory by his boys' chorus. Lysicrates' monument was just one of many such that dotted the streets of ancient Athens.

Dionysus of Eleutherae

Comedy and tragedy began in Athens as special kinds of choral performances in honor of Dionysus. Initially and for much of their early history, they were particularly attached to the cult of Dionysus of Eleutherae. Dionysus was worshiped under that title in a springtime festival that came to be called the Great Dionysia or the City Dionysia. The focal point of the celebration was a shrine sacred to Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis. The ancient cult statue there was said to have come originally from a town on the outskirts of Attica, Eleutherae.

On the eve of the festival, the god's statue, which had been temporarily removed to a different location, was reinstalled in its temple near the Acropolis, reenacting its original reception in Athens. Then came a festive procession culminating in the sacrifice of a bull. Participants carried offerings of various kinds in baskets and ceramic vessels. When Athens was an imperial power, tribute from subject states was proudly displayed. The competing choruses marched alongside their choregi, who were dressed with particular splendor. To a modern observer,

however, the giant phalluses would have been the most striking element.

The story behind the phalluses is found in an ancient commentary on a play by Aristophanes.⁷ The ceremony started when a man of Eleutherae, Pegasus by name, offered a statue of Dionysus to the Athenians, but they refused the gift.

The people of Attica did not receive the god with honor, but the decision did not go unpunished. Because of the god's anger a disease descended into the men's genitals, and it was a dreadful, incurable thing. When they were unable to cure the disease with any charm or skill, urgent ambassadors were sent to the oracle. Returning they announced that there was only one cure: if they received the god with all honor. Persuaded by the announcement, the Athenians made phalluses at both private and public expense and honored the god with these in remembrance of their suffering. Perhaps it is also because the god is the cause of childbirth, for wine arouses pleasure and sexual desires.

Of course, such stories are later inventions designed to explain rituals whose actual origins have been forgotten. Presumably the phallic images were originally a way of praying for or giving thanks for the fertility of spring.

The original festival included two kinds of song. "Phallic songs" were scurrilous, improvised ditties sung by individuals during the procession. "Dithyrambs" (the etymology of the term is unknown) were choral songs about Dionysus and, as time went by, other gods and heroes. According to Aristotle, comedy evolved out of the phallic songs and tragedy from the dithyrambs (*Poetics* 1449a).

According to tradition, the decisive step was taken by a poet named Thespis when he used a mask to impersonate a dithyrambic hero, speaking directly to the leader of the chorus. In other words, he invented dramatic dialogues, and thus tragedy and comedy were born. According to the Athenians' records, Thespis won a prize for tragedy in 534 BCE. Unfortunately,

neither his work nor any of the other sixth-century dramas survive. They could not have been very complex. According to Aristotle (*Poetics* 1449a), it was not until the fifth century that Aeschylus introduced a second speaking actor and Sophocles a third. So it seems that for a number of years tragedies consisted of single actors making speeches to choruses.

The City Dionysia and Other Dramatic Festivals

In Classical times a magistrate selected three tragedians and five comic poets to compete in the City Dionysia. In addition, each of the ten democratic tribes was represented by a boys' chorus and a men's chorus of fifty members each. Choregi were appointed to pay for the training and outfitting of chorus and actors. Each of the tragic poets presented a tetralogy (three tragedies and a satyr play) on one of the first three mornings. That was followed by a comedy in the afternoon. Two additional days were devoted to the two remaining comedies and the dithyrambic choruses.

Tragedies and comedies were also presented at two lesser festivals in the wintertime. The Rural Dionysia consisted of a series of local Dionysiac festivals, some of which included dramatic competitions. The largest of those was held in Piraeus, Athens' harbor town. It is said that Socrates attended plays by Euripides there, and there are references to a theater in Piraeus at the end of the fifth century. In the mid-fifth century the festival known as the Lenaia was organized along the lines of the City Dionysia. As in the latter, five comic poets competed at the Lenaia, but only two tragedians—with two plays each.

The Theater of Dionysus

Plays were originally performed in an *orchestra* (dancing area) in the Athenian agora. In the course of the fifth century, they

were moved to the Theater of Dionysus, an amphitheater on the south slope of the Acropolis. Originally, this consisted of nothing more than a level circular area with a diameter of about sixty-five feet, designed primarily to accommodate the choruses of fifty men or boys as they danced and sang. For the purposes of drama, a stage building or *skene* was eventually added on the downhill side of the orchestra, providing a place for actors to change masks and costumes and remain out of sight when off-stage.

The skene's exterior provided a backdrop for the action. As in *Antigone*, it often represented the gateway of a king's palace, but other scenery was possible. According to Aristotle (*Poetics* 1449a), it was Sophocles himself who introduced scene painting.

On either side of the skene were paths leading into the orchestra. Actors sometimes made exits and entrances using one or the other, when they were not entering or leaving the palace. In *Antigone* and other plays, one direction was associated with the countryside or foreign parts and the other with the city. Presumably Haemon enters the stage by the city path, since he refers to talk in the city. Antigone exits the other way, by the countryside path, when she is led to her prison. Early in every tragedy, the chorus makes a grand entrance by these paths, marching, dancing, and singing. This part of the tragedy is known as the *parodos*.

In Sophocles' day, most of the spectators sat on wooden benches. That arrangement was replaced by the marble Theater of Dionysus in the fourth century, which accommodated 14,000 to 17,000 spectators. The dimensions of the later theater give us our only basis for guessing the size of the crowds that gathered in early times.

The question of whether women attended the theater has never been entirely settled. There is no proof one way or the other for the fifth century. Allusions in Plato's writing, however,

seem to prove that women were in attendance in the fourth century.

Prologue, Parodos, Strophe, Antistrophe

Plays began with *prologues* in which the dramatic situation was revealed through the remarks of one or more of the actors. This was followed by the *parodos*, the entrance of the chorus, whose song identified them and explained their presence. In *Antigone* the chorus consists of Theban elders who have been summoned by Creon to hear his decree. During the rest of the play, spoken passages dominated by actors alternated with choral songs and dances, but the separation was not absolute. Actors sometimes broke into song, while the leader of the chorus regularly engaged in spoken exchanges with the chorus. Choral songs consisted of stanzas labeled *strophe* and *antistrophe* (“turn” and “counter-turn”). Metrically, each strophe was an exact, syllable-by-syllable match with the following antistrophe. Like stanzas in a song, strophes and antistrophes were sung to the same melody. Their names are thought to reflect the different dance movements that accompanied them.

Masks

Actors wore masks that were comparatively naturalistic in the Classical period but grew more grotesque with the passage of time. The masks permitted one actor to play several parts, thus overcoming the limitations of the three-actor rule. In *Antigone* the lead actor would probably have played Creon, who is onstage almost continuously. There is some latitude for the division of roles between the second and third actors. One might play Antigone, Haemon, Tiresias, and Eurydice; the other, Ismene, the guard, and the messenger. However distributed, the various roles made tremendous demands on

the actors' versatility, and that was part of the Greek theater's charm.

Music and Dance

A Greek tragedy was like a long, elaborate song. The spoken parts were composed in a strict iambic meter, so that even the speeches and conversations had a perceptible rhythm and momentum. The songs of the chorus were accompanied by flute music and possibly other instrumentation. As time went by, the music began to overwhelm the words, which became less and less important. At the time *Antigone* was written, however, words still mattered a great deal.

Dance also played an integral part. We have little idea what the dances looked like, but it is generally assumed that they were mimetic. Hence we can find clues in the chorus's words. In *Antigone*, for example, the chorus enters singing about Thebes's glorious victory and mocking one of the enemy soldiers:

He rode the air, then hit the ground,
a torch in hand, his mind unsound;
he blew his maddened breath around,
most hateful breezes there.

(134–137)

Here I think we have to imagine some leaping and bounding. Such a dance would have been a good foil for Antigone's composure and the objective correlative of Creon's internal state.

Interpreting *Antigone*

I have always found magisterial interpretations of great literary works presumptuous. Different people inevitably draw different

lessons from the imaginary events created by literary artists—just as they do from real events. In fact, the more interesting the event is, the more diverse the reactions will be. There is no scientific way to determine an author's intentions—and even if there were, why should readers or spectators be confined by them?

Still, it is natural to share one's reflections on the meaning of a story as good as *Antigone's*. The nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel did. His famous interpretation of *Antigone*, which he viewed as a model tragedy, has served as a springboard for almost every subsequent discussion of the play's meaning. References to and praise for *Antigone* are scattered throughout his voluminous works. The clearest statement of his interpretation comes in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*.

The collision of the two highest ethical powers, one with the other, is presented in a fully rounded manner in the ultimate example of tragedy, *Antigone*. In it, love of family, the sacred, the inward, that which belongs to the realm of emotion and is therefore called the law of the gods of the underworld, collides with the law of the state. Creon is not a tyrant but an ethical power. He is not without justice. He asserts that the law of the state, the authority of the government, must be obeyed and that punishment must result from its violation. Each of these two sides actualizes only one of the ethical powers and contains only one of them. That is their one-sidedness, and the verdict of eternal justice is that they both accomplish injustice because they are one-sided, but both also accomplish justice.⁸

The general idea implicit in these remarks seems right: a tragic conflict comes about when both adversaries act ethically. Furthermore Hegel's characterization of the different forces driving *Antigone* and Creon is accurate. Finally, Athenians of Sophocles' day were acutely aware of the tension between loyalty

to the family and loyalty to the state. The constitutional reforms of 506 BCE, which created Athenian democracy, replaced traditional bloodline tribes with artificial groups based on place of residence (*deme*) for political, but not religious, purposes. The goal of the reform was to lessen the importance of extended family ties and promote devotion to the state while respecting religious practices observed by families. Creon touches on this tension explicitly in his speech to Haemon (658–660):

I'm going to kill her, notwithstanding hymns
to kindred Zeus. If I let kinsmen act
disgracefully, then what will others do?

A Hegelian interpretation works best, however, in a case where the adversaries defend the justice of their cause to the bitter end. That is obviously not true of Creon. In his next to last words, he confesses that he “handled things all wrong” (1345).⁹ None of the other characters in the play endorse his actions. Even the docile choral leader signals his doubts by suggesting that the gods may have sprinkled dust on Polyneices’ corpse (278–279). Creon’s furious rejoinder shows why his subjects are not inclined to be outspoken. At the end, when Creon enters carrying Haemon’s corpse, the whole chorus remarks that he is carrying a reminder of his own mistakes (1260). The choral leader adds that he has been late to grasp justice (1270).

The inevitable conclusion is that Creon’s misfortune did not come about precisely because he was acting in accordance with an ethical principle. It may be true that he was seeking the good of the city by defending obedience to the law. The problem is that what he was defending was not a legitimate law. This is a distinction made by Plato: the only true laws are good laws, those that are grounded in reason and actually benefit their subjects.¹⁰ Creon himself realizes as much when he is finally persuaded to bury Polyneices and free Antigone. It is always

best, he says, “to live / your life respecting well-established laws” (III5). That amounts to an acknowledgment that he was not previously defending a well-established law. Thus Hegel’s statement that Creon was acting in accordance with an ethical principle is problematic.

It makes a difference dramatically. If there were a good reason to prevent Polyneices’ burial, if Creon could be represented as the champion of a worthy cause, his conflict with Antigone would seem tragic, fated, and inevitable, since neither party could be expected to abandon his (or her) basic principles. The way the story unfolds, however, all that was needed to end the conflict was for Creon to listen to reason.

Great dramas like *Antigone* do indeed hinge on conflicting but equally justifiable views of what is right. One’s evaluation of the central character changes according to the way in which one answers the central ethical question, but the ethical question is impossible to lay to rest entirely. The result is that one’s view of the central character is unstable. He or she becomes a fascinating optical illusion, an angel or a devil, depending on one’s focus. A great literary work is not one that settles a question, but one that keeps you thinking.

In *Antigone* as I see it, however, the critical ethical conflict is not between Creon and Antigone but between Antigone and Ismene. The question is the one broached in the prologue: whether they should defy Creon’s decree by attempting to bury Polyneices. To Antigone’s purely moral and emotional pleas, Ismene opposes a weighty practical consideration. What Antigone wants to do—namely, bury Polyneices—is impossible (90). She can try, but Creon and his guards will not let her succeed. What then is the benefit? “A hopeless quest should not be made at all” (92).

Ismene’s objection is powerful but not conclusive. Antigone’s courageous defiance naturally wins admiration. Indeed, Haemon mentions how much she is honored by the

citizens (693–699). The world would be a better place if everyone stood up to tyrants so boldly. Still, one must consider consequences. Antigone’s defiance ultimately leads to her own death, Haemon’s, and Eurydice’s—a high price to pay for admiration. True, Polyneices was finally buried, but that came about because of Tiresias’ intervention, not Antigone’s. If she had only listened to Ismene, the story would have ended with a decent burial and a happy marriage. Did the situation really call for a martyr?

Unlike the disagreement between Antigone and Creon, that between Antigone and Ismene remains unresolved even in retrospect. In a remarkable scene, after Antigone is condemned, the sisters are reconciled emotionally but agree to disagree on the issue that divided them initially (548–558).

ISMENE: What life is dear to me that’s lacking you?

ANTIGONE: Ask Creon that. You guard his interests well.

I: Why be so hurtful? Nothing’s gained by that.

A: That’s true. I hurt myself when mocking you.

I: There must be something I can do to help.

A: Just save yourself. I won’t be envious.

I: What desolation! Not to share your fate!

A: You’ve chosen life while I have chosen death.

I: At least I spoke. My protest wasn’t mute.

A: Your views seemed fair to some. To others, mine.

I: We both fell short of gaining what we sought.

Note Antigone’s remark that some people agreed with her and others with Ismene. What people? The conversation in which the disagreement occurred was a private one by design, outside the city gates before the arrival of the chorus or any other character. No one heard it—except for thousands of spectators in the Theater of Dionysus. Those are the people that Sophocles has in mind. He is tacitly acknowledging that he has created a morally ambiguous situation for the spectators’ intellectual pleasure.

The theme of the dangers of boastfulness recurs throughout the play. The note is first struck when the chorus enters singing about their victory over the outrageously arrogant Argive invaders. As ruler Creon exhibits exactly the same fault, vastly overrating his own wisdom. His downfall is his failure to recognize the limits of his wisdom, as Haemon tries to persuade him (720–724).

... I'd call being born omniscient best.
The scales, however, rarely tilt that way.
Thus it becomes a good and seemingly thing
to profit from what others have to say.

The chorus's famous "ode to man" (332–375) praises human ingenuity but ends on the same kind of cautionary note, abjuring excessively bold actions.

In my view, the play is designed primarily to make us ponder Antigone's character and actions and our reactions to them in this context.

Antigone is clearly vulnerable to accusations of arrogance. She not only defies Creon; she is proud of the fact. In the prologue, when Ismene volunteers to keep her action secret, Antigone says (86–87),

No! Shout it! I'll despise you even more
for silence. Be my herald everywhere.

She also angrily refuses to let Ismene share in the glory of her action (538–539). It is not surprising that Creon explicitly includes Antigone's boastfulness as part of the justification for her punishment (480–483):

This girl's adept at hubris though. She proved
as much by breaking duly published laws.
Her second act of hubris was to laugh
and boast about her actions afterward.

Finally, it may be telling that Antigone compares herself to the fatally boastful Queen Niobe (823–833). Perhaps if Antigone had been more respectful and conciliatory, Creon would have relented sooner and the tragedy would have been averted.

But is Antigone merely one more example of self-destructive arrogance, or does she represent something higher and better? Do we side with her or with Ismene? It is not an easy choice.

Notes

1. Comprehensive information on the earliest occurrences of Greek myths is found in Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

2. Thrace was the barbarian land north of Greece and Macedonia, roughly modern Bulgaria. The Edonians were a Thracian tribe.

3. Tantalus was a mortal son of Zeus, who favored him by allowing him to attend a banquet of the gods. For reasons difficult to imagine, Tantalus sought to trick the gods into eating human flesh. He butchered and chopped up his son Pelops and brought him to the banquet. The gods were instantly aware of the trick, except for Demeter, who ate Pelops' shoulder. Tantalus was consigned to the underworld, where an overhanging boulder kept him in a state of constant anxiety. (In other versions, he is tormented by hunger and thirst as he stands in a pool of water that recedes from his lips, underneath fruit trees whose branches are just out of reach.) The gods put Pelops' remains into a cauldron, and the three Fates pulled him out as good as new—except that he was missing his shoulder, which they replaced with an ivory prosthesis. It became him so well that Poseidon fell in love with him, and he spent the rest of his adolescence as Poseidon's young lover. When he grew up, Poseidon helped him win the kingdom of Elis, where he established the Olympic games. The myth appears in Pindar's *First Olympian Ode* (476 BCE) and was known to *Antigone's* audience. Pindar claims to be shocked by the story and denies that it could be true.

4. Antigone and Ismene appear at the end of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* (1005–1078), which was written before *Antigone*, but most scholars consider the passage in which they appear to be a later interpolation, an updating of the play to bring it into accord with Sophocles' version of events.

The reference to Antigone and Ismene that seems likely to have come from the *Oedipodeia* occurs in a fragment from a mythological encyclopedia by the fifth-century scholar Pherecydes (*Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* 3 F 94) preserved in the scholia to Euripides' *Phoenician Women* (53): Pherecydes asserts that Creon gave the kingship to Oedipus along with Laius' wife, his mother, Jocasta. His children by her were Phrastor and Laonytus, who were killed by the Minyans and Erginus. When a year passed, Oedipus married Euryganeia, the daughter of Periphas. She gave birth to Antigone and Ismene, whom Tydeus killed in a fountain. The fountain is named Ismene after her. Strange as this story seems, it apparently had wide currency before Ismene was revived by Sophocles. According to an ancient preface to the *Antigone* by a certain Sallustius, the seventh-century lyric poet Mimnermus reported (fragment 21 A Gerber) that Tydeus slew Ismene at Athena's command when he caught Ismene meeting a lover. The incident is the subject of at least two surviving vase paintings; see Gantz, *Early Greek Myth*, 513–514.

5. *Duspotmos* (869), more literally “ill-fated.”

6. Eleusis is a suburb of Athens famous for a temple of Demeter where the Mysteries of Eleusis were celebrated, a yearly ritual that assured initiates of a happy afterlife.

7. *Scholia in Aristophanis Acharnenses*, ed. N. G. Wilson (Groningen: Bouma, 1975), 243a.

8. G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, vol. 17: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), 2.2.3a, my translation. This passage is identified as “the canonic text” by George Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 37.

9. Literally, “All the things in (my) hands (are) crosswise (*lechria*).” This is perhaps a deliberate contrast with his earlier references to keeping the city on straight course (cf. 163, 190).

10. Cf. *Laws* 715b; *Hippias Major* 284c–285b; *Minos* 317d.

Antigone

Characters

ANTIGONE, daughter of Oedipus, former king of Thebes

ISMENE, Antigone's sister

CREON, new king of Thebes

GUARD, a Theban soldier

HAEMON, Creon's son

TIRESIAS, an old, blind prophet

MESSANGER, Creon's attendant

EURDYCE, Creon's wife

CHORUS AND CHORAL LEADER,¹ elders of the city of Thebes

CREON'S ATTENDANTS, mute characters, a group of servants
including at least two armed guards

1. The choral leader speaks in the same iambic meter that the actors normally employ. The chorus chants some anapestic passages in unison. In this text, those passages are introduced with the notation "Chorus (chanting)." The choral odes and the lamentations by Creon and Antigone were originally sung in lyric meters to musical accompaniment; the melodies are now lost. Here they are translated into short rhymed stanzas and printed in italics to set them apart from the spoken portions of the play. There is a line-by-line correspondence between my translation of the play's spoken parts and the Greek text, but my translations of the anapests and choral passages do not strictly adhere to the lineation of the original or later editions.

(The story concerns the children of Oedipus: sons Eteocles and Polyneices, daughters Antigone and Ismene. After their father vacated the kingship of Thebes, Eteocles and Polyneices grew to adulthood and fought over the city. Eteocles gained control with the support of Creon, his mother's brother. Polyneices went to southern Greece, where he raised an army to help him dethrone his brother. A great battle ensued outside the gates of the city. The forces of Eteocles and Creon were victorious, but Polyneices and Eteocles killed each other in battle. The play begins the next morning. Creon has assumed royal power but is still worried about security. He has commanded that Eteocles be given a hero's burial while Polyneices' body is left on the ground to rot. The play's action unfolds in front of a gateway leading to the royal palace. A path on one side leads to the countryside; a path on the other leads to town. As the play begins, Ismene enters from the palace and approaches Antigone, who has been waiting impatiently.)

ANTIGONE:

Ismene, sister—mine as I am yours,
has Zeus spared us survivors any part
of Oedipus's evil legacy?
There's nothing—nothing painful, ruinous,
or foul, no degradation I have not
observed among the troubles we endure.
And now what's this decree that people say
the general² announces everywhere?

2. The "general" is Creon. He has just led the Theban army to victory over Polyneices and his Argive allies and has assumed royal power, but Antigone never refers to him as "king."

Have *you* heard any talk, or don't you know
that his hostilities now threaten friends?³

10

ISMENE:

I've heard no good reports concerning friends,
Antigone, nor other painful news,
not since we two were robbed of brothers, dead
one deadly day by double fratricide.
No, since the Argive army fled by night,
I'm not aware of any weightier
event to give me either joy or pain.

ANTIGONE:

That's what I thought! That's why I summoned you
out here beyond the gates for private talk.

ISMENE:

Do tell. You're seething over something said.

20

ANTIGONE:

Of our two brothers, Creon honors one
with burial but grants the other none.
Eteocles, they say, he buries well,
respecting law and justice, gaining him
an honored place among the dead below,

3. The term "friends" (*philoí*, dear ones) denoted both family members and political allies. Traditional Greek ethics held that one should do good to "friends" and harm to "enemies" (*echthroi*, the hated). The play's conflict arises in part because Creon insists on treating Polyneices as an enemy on political grounds, whereas Antigone insists that he is a friend because they are blood relatives.

but as for poor slain Polyneices' corpse,
he issued all the people orders not
to bury it or even weep and moan.
Unburied, unlamented, it must lie
exposed, a tasty treat for passing birds. 30
They say that gentle Creon issued that
decree for you and me especially—me!—
and now he's heading here to make it known
to all, and not as something trivial.
No! Death by public stoning is the price
if anybody violates the law.
In face of this, you'll quickly demonstrate
your noble heart—or else your cowardice.

ISMENE:

If that's how matters stand, poor sister, how
could I undo the knot or tighten it?⁴ 40

ANTIGONE:

Consider working side by side with me.

ISMENE:

Is there some danger? *What* is your request?

ANTIGONE:

A helping hand in rescuing the corpse.

ISMENE:

You'd bury him against the city's law?

4. Apparently an idiomatic expression, the equivalent of "what could I do to help?"

ANTIGONE:

My brother, yes! And yours, though you refuse to help.⁵ I won't be caught deserting him.

ISMENE:

Daring to do what Creon just forbade?

ANTIGONE:

He has no right to sever me from mine.

ISMENE:

Oh sister! Think about our father, how
he died, how people scorned and hated him, 50
when he uncovered sinful deeds, then turned
his hand against his double wells of sight.
And next⁶ his doubly titled mother-wife
employed a braided rope to end her life.
Third came our brothers, two unhappy men
who wrought their common fate in just one day
of violent homicidal give-and-take.
Then, fourth and finally, think about our deaths:
alone, ignoble, criminals, if we

5. A doubtful line. A strict, literal translation of Antigone's words is, "I will indeed bury my brother and your brother, if you are unwilling to." In other words, she speaks as if two different unburied brothers were involved, one hers, the other Ismene's. In fact, the idea must be, "I will bury my brother, who is also your brother, even if you're unwilling (to bury him)."

6. In Homer's *Odyssey* (11.277–280) as well as Sophocles' own *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus' wife hangs herself before Oedipus blinds himself. In other versions of the story (e.g., Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, Euripides' *Phoenician Women*), she survives for many years after his blinding; see my synopsis of *The Phoenician Women* in appendix 2.

transgress our ruler's powerful decree. 60
We mustn't overlook this simple fact:
we're women, unequipped to battle men.
We're under those more powerful by far.
We have to heed their words, however harsh.
And so while asking those beneath the earth
to be forgiving, seeing that I'm coerced,
I shall obey the current government.
The actions you propose seem mad to me.

ANTIGONE:

Then I won't bother you. Not even if
you wished to help would you be welcome now. 70
Do what you please. I'll bury him. To die
attempting that seems glorious to me.
Beloved and loving, I'll lie down with him,
a holy criminal. We have to please
the dead much longer than our rulers here.
I'll rest with them forever there. But suit
yourself. Dishonor what the gods revere.

ISMENE:

I don't do that at all. I simply can't
ignore the citizens' explicit will.

ANTIGONE:

While you perfect excuses such as those, 80
I'll go and build my dearest brother's tomb.

ISMENE:

Poor sister! I'm so terrified for you!

ANTIGONE:

Don't be. Correct your own ill-fated path.

ISMENE:

Just don't let anybody know your plan.
Keep it a secret. So of course shall I.

ANTIGONE:

No! Shout it! I'll despise you even more
for silence. Be my herald everywhere.

ISMENE:

Your heart is growing hot for chilly deeds.

ANTIGONE:

Yet I'll be pleasing those I must oblige.

ISMENE:

If you succeed. Your passions overreach.

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ANTIGONE:

Perhaps. I'll rest when I'm exhausted then.

ISMENE:

A hopeless quest should not be made at all.

ANTIGONE:

Such talk will only make me hate you more.
The dead will hate you too and rightly so.
Leave me and my misguided plans alone
to suffer what you dread. For nothing I
endure will dim my glory when I die.

(Exit Antigone toward the countryside.)

ISMENE:

Go on! You've made your mind up, reckless fool!
And yet to friends you are a loyal friend.

(Exit Ismene into the palace. Enter chorus from the city.)

CHORUS (singing triumphantly):

Parodos (100–162)⁷

*Ray of sun, the fairest one
that Thebes of seven gates has seen,
eyelid of golden day you've come
at last above Dircean⁹ streams.*

Strophe⁸ A (100–109)

*You spurred a bridle-shaking flight:
the Argive man¹⁰ has left the field,
a headlong fugitive despite
his panoply and silver shield.*

CHORUS (chanting):

He entered our country, aroused by
the violent

Anapests (110–116)

7. The *parodos* is sung by the chorus as it makes its initial entrance into the dancing area at the foot of the stage. The *parodos* and the other songs sung by choruses in Greek tragedies are divided into metrically equivalent stanzas known as *strophes* and *antistrophes*. A striking feature of this *parodos* is that the chorus punctuates its *strophes* and *antistrophes* with passages chanted in anapestic rhythms associated with marching. Similar passages mark the entrances of some of the characters and Antigone's final departure. They give the chorus a martial tone.

8. On *strophes* and *antistrophes*, see the Introduction. As mentioned in note 1, my translations of lyric passages and anapests do not reproduce the line divisions of the standard Greek text. For example, my translation of Strophe A above consists of eight lines in English but corresponds to ten lines (100–109) of the standard Greek text. On the other hand, my translations of spoken passages do reproduce the lineation of the standard Greek text. In both cases, I have given corresponding line numbers from the Greek text to facilitate comparisons.

9. Dirce was a small river near Thebes, named after an early queen.

10. The "Argive man" stands for the whole Argive army—the force that Polyneices led from Argos in his ill-fated attempt to seize the city.

dispute Polyneices began.
 He lit with a cry like an eagle on high,
 plying pinions the color of snow.
 He'd arms in abundance and helmets with menacing crests.

CHORUS (singing):

He hovered then. We heard him roar. Antistrophe A (117–126)
He rustled bloody spearheads by
our seven gates but left before
his jaws could suck our marrow dry.
Before Hephaestus's¹¹ attack
could lay our crown of towers low,
our martial ruckus turned him back.
We overmatched the serpent's foe.¹²

CHORUS (chanting):

Zeus, who despises the boastful Anapests (127–133)
 words of a grandiose tongue,
 seeing them approach like a river,
 proud in the clanging of gold,
 brandished a fiery missile
 smiting an enemy¹³ who

11. "Hephaestus's attack" stands for fire. Hephaestus was the blacksmith of the gods and therefore associated with fire. (Prometheus stole fire for mankind from his forge.) The chorus does not mean to imply that the god was hostile to Thebes.

12. The serpent was emblematic of Thebes. In myth, when Cadmus, the city's founder, arrived in the area, he slew a local serpent and sowed its teeth. Armed warriors, Thebes's first native citizens, sprang from the ground.

13. Capaneus, an Argive hero, had boasted that not even Zeus's "holy fire" (lightning) would prevent him from storming the walls of Thebes. The incident is recounted more fully in Euripides' *Phoenician Women* 1172–1187.

stood on a parapet raising
premature victory cries.

CHORUS (singing):

*He rode the air, then hit the ground,
a torch in hand, his mind unsound;
he blew his maddened breath around,
most hateful breezes there.
Things didn't go as he had planned.
Great violent Ares¹⁴ lent a hand
with different fates for every man.
He set a headlong pace.¹⁵*

Strophe B (I34–I40)

CHORUS (chanting):

Seven¹⁶ who led the assault on our gates,
seven in number as well,
meeting their matches contributed bronze
to the god who routs enemies, Zeus,
except for a duo¹⁷ of piteous fate,
their father and mother the same.
Leveling conquering spears they acquired
their common inheritance, death.

Anapests (I4I–I47)

14. The god of war.

15. Literally, the chorus calls Ares their “trace-horse on the right,” the pace-setting strongest horse in a team of four.

16. Polyneices and six other heroes led the attack on Thebes: Adrastus, king of Argos; Tydeus, father of Diomedes; the prophet Amphiaraus; boastful Capaneus; Hippomedon; and Parthenopaeus. Adrastus survived; Amphiaraus was miraculously swallowed by the earth; and the others died in battle.

17. Polyneices and Eteocles, who killed each other in battle. Euripides’ *Phoenician Women* 1359–1424 has a blow-by-blow description.

CHORUS (singing):

*Since glory-giving Victory's here
to share the Theban horsemen's cheer,
let recent warfare disappear!
Leave our memories!
Let's visit all our shrines instead
with song and dance, not go to bed,
and let the god who spins our head,
Dionysus,¹⁸ rule!*

Antistrophe B (148–154)

(Enter Creon and attendants from the palace.)

CHORUS (chanting):

But here is the king of our country,
the son of Menoeceus, Creon,
whom gods and his recent good fortune
have given authority to.
What counsel has caused him to call for
this conference of elderly men,
proclaimed by a herald's decree?

Anapests (155–161)

CREON:

Men, gods have rocked the city's ship once more
with giant waves, then safely set it straight.
My emissaries ordered you to come
apart from all the others, since I knew
your reverence when Laius¹⁹ had the throne.
Again when Oedipus was steering us,

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18. The god of wine and revelry, Dionysus was specially honored in Thebes because his mother, Semele, was a Theban princess seduced by Zeus. On joyous occasions, Theban thoughts naturally turn to Dionysus.

19. Oedipus' father, whom Oedipus killed in ignorance of his identity.

then died, I knew the steady counsels that
 you gave concerning their²⁰ surviving sons.
 Now since those sons have met their double fate 170
 in just one day's exchange of deadly blows,
 and each was stained by spilling kindred blood,
 all dignity and power now belong
 to me, since I'm their closest relative.
 You'll never know the judgment, mind, or soul
 of any man until he's proved himself
 discharging offices and making laws.
 A nation's ruler who does not employ
 the best of counsels, but succumbs to fear
 and holds his tongue has always seemed to me 180
 to show the lowest form of cowardice,
 nor do I think the man who values friends
 above his fatherland has any worth.
 May ever watchful Zeus be witness now:
 I won't look on in silence when I see
 disaster masked as safety closing in.
 I'll never call the nation's enemy
 my friend.²¹ I always have one fact in mind:
 the nation keeps us safe. So long as it
 is sailing straight, we've all the friends we need. 190
 With rules like these, I'll keep the city strong.
 Just now I made a proclamation that's
 germane. It touches Oedipus's sons.
 Eteocles has died, died fighting for
 the city, worthily in every way,

20. "Their" apparently refers to Oedipus and Jocasta, even though Creon has not mentioned the latter.

21. Creon's particular point is that blood relatives who are divided politically cease to be friends.

I've ordered you to bury him with all
 the honors that attend a worthy corpse.
 As for his brother, Polyneices, though,
 that exile who returned to immolate
 the fatherland and native gods, who wished 200
 to glut himself on kindred blood and lead
 his friends away as slaves, the city's heard
 what I decree: let no one honor him
 with burial or mourning; rather, leave
 his corpse exposed and watch as hungry dogs
 and vultures rip his flesh disgracefully.
 The thought behind my words is simply this:
 I'll never let an evil man surpass
 the good in honors. No! My honor goes
 in life and death to loyal citizens. 210

CHORAL LEADER:

Distinguish friend from foe that way if it
 seems best to you, Menoeceus's son.
 You can establish any law you choose
 in governing the dead—the living too.

CREON:

Then you be watchful guards of my decrees.

CHORAL LEADER:

You ought to give a younger man that task!

CREON:

Don't worry. Zealous soldiers guard the corpse.

CHORAL LEADER:

Then what's this other work of which you speak?

CREON:

Not taking sides with those who break the law.

CHORAL LEADER:

Nobody's fool enough to yearn for death.

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(Enter guard from the countryside.)

CREON:

And that's the price of doing so, but hope
for profit's been the death of many men.

GUARD:

My lord! I won't begin by claiming that
I've come on nimble foot with breathless speed.
In fact, I've been extremely hesitant.
I'd take a forward step, then circle back.
Meanwhile my soul would mutter things like this:
"Why go where you'll be punished, idiot?"
Or "Hesitating, fool? If someone else
tells Creon first, you'll be in dire straits!"
Amid such thoughts, I wandered back and forth,
and thus my journey changed from short to long,
but, finally, coming here to you prevailed.
You'll hear my worthless tale for what it's worth.
The single hope I'm clinging to is this:
one suffers only that which fate decrees.

230

CREON:

What lies behind your anxious state of mind?

GUARD:

I'd rather start with facts about myself.

I didn't do the deed or see who did.
I shouldn't suffer any consequence.

240

CREON:

The way you're circling and taking aim,
you clearly mean to tell me something bad.

GUARD:

So true! Bad news engenders long delay.

CREON:

Just finish your report, then go away!

GUARD:

All right! Just now somebody buried it,
the corpse in question, covering its flesh
with thirsty dust and doing holy rites.

CREON:

What man's acquired such audacity?

GUARD:

Can't say. No pickax left its markings there;
no mattock churned up any dirt. The ground
was hard and dry. No wagon tracks appeared.
Whoever did it didn't leave a trace,
and when the early morning watch revealed
the crime, surprise and anger filled our ranks.
The corpse had vanished, not entombed but cloaked
in dust, as if somebody feared a curse.
No evidence suggested that a beast
or passing dog had torn the corpse's flesh.
A storm of angry words was raging soon.
One guard accused another. Blows seemed sure

250

260

to follow. None of us could keep the peace.
 We all looked guilty. Proof was lacking though,
 and everybody pleaded ignorance.
 We volunteered to handle molten lead,
 to walk through flames,²² to take a solemn oath
 that we had neither done the deed nor knew
 who laid the plans or executed them.
 When our investigation came to naught,
 some soldier's chance remark made all of us
 lower our heads in abject fear. We'd no
 response or hope of matters ending well. 270
 The fellow simply said the crime would have
 to be reported, not concealed, from you.
 No one disputed that, and I obtained
 this privilege by lot, O lucky me!
 And so I'm here on terms I didn't choose.
 Nobody loves a man with hateful news.

CHORAL LEADER:

My lord, I couldn't help but wonder if,
 perhaps, the gods are doing some of this.

CREON:

Silence! How dare you anger me like that? 280
 You show yourself as witless as you're old!
 Suggesting that the gods are taking care
 of that man's corpse—the very thought's obscene,
 as if he were a benefactor whom
 the gods would honor, covering his flesh,

22. The sense behind volunteering to handle molten lead or walk through fire is unclear. The reference could be to ordeals by which innocence is established or to penalties for swearing falsely.

the man who meant to burn their pillared shrines,
 destroying their land and overturning law.
 Do gods you know of honor evil men?
 Absurd! Some citizens, however, balk
 at my commands with constant murmuring. 290
 They shake their heads in secret, fighting with
 their yokes instead of showing proper love.
 I'm absolutely sure that some of them,
 seduced by money, undertook this crime.
 Of human institutions, nothing does
 more harm to men than silver. Cities fall,
 destroyed by it, and families lose their homes.
 It teaches people how to turn their thoughts
 from righteousness to underhanded deeds.
 It's what invented criminality 300
 and disrespect for every sacred thing.
 But rest assured, whichever hirelings
 committed *this* atrocity will pay.
 As Zeus still garners reverence from me—

(Turning to the guard.)

these words are meant for you, so listen well!—
 unless the perpetrator's caught and *you*
 deliver him to me, before my eyes,
 no simple death will be enough for you.
 You'll hang in torment first, to show your guilt
 and teach you where your profits should be sought, 310
 so you can snatch your future living there
 and learn that loving every kind of gain
 is wrong. In fact, ill-gotten gains destroy
 a host of fools for every man they save.

GUARD:

A word? Or should I simply go away?

CREON:

Aren't you aware your talking causes pain?

GUARD:

But where's the pain located? Ears or soul?

CREON:

What difference could my pain's location make?

GUARD:

I hurt your ears. The doer hurt your soul.

CREON:

My god! You are a babbler, born and bred!

320

GUARD:

And that implies I didn't *do* a thing.

CREON:

That too. You risked your life for silver coin.

GUARD:

No! No!

It's dreadful when a judge's judgment's false!

CREON:

Enjoy phrase-making now, but if you don't
bring me the guilty party, you'll declare,
"Dishonest gain is sorrow's architect."

(Exit Creon into the palace.)

GUARD (addressing the chorus):

I truly hope the guilty party's found,
but that's an issue fortune must decide.

Don't think you'll see me coming here again.
My fondest hopes have been exceeded: I'm
alive. O gods! you have my deepest thanks!

330

(Exit guard toward countryside.)

CHORUS (singing):

*Many strange things²³ do exist
but mankind's the uncanniest.
He's that which sails across the gray,
wind-battered sea. He finds a way,
though serried swells impede his route.
He plunges through. He's wearing out
the highest god of greatest girth,
the infinite, unwearied earth.
His yearly plowing's undeterred.
He partners with the equine herd.*

Strophe A (332–341)

*He routs the birds' light-headed clans,
the savage creatures' caravans,
and ocean's salty progeny.
It does no good for them to flee.
He catches them in woven nets.
Man's too smart. He always gets
the best of beasts. He's learned to force
a shoulder yoke upon the horse's*

Antistrophe A (342–352)

23. "Strange things" translates the Greek word *deina*, which has a wide range of meanings depending on context: fearful, powerful, wonderful, clever. There is no obvious connection between this first song by the chorus and the immediate dramatic context. The song's main theme, however, reverberates throughout the play: despite man's incredible ingenuity, the most important source of happiness is reverence for divinely sanctioned laws.

*shaggy neck. Down from the hill,
unwearied bulls obey his will.*

*He's mastered speech and airy thought,
the lawful temperaments that ought
to rule a city. Keeping warm
in shelters built against the storm
in barren regions isn't hard.
He stops at nothing. Flight is barred
by Death alone, despite which he's
found many cures for dread disease.*

Strophe B (353–364)

*His skill's resourcefulness exceeds
all hope, though it as often leads
to evil ends as otherwise.
A city prospers, or it dies,
when laws and sacred oaths are king.
No one to whom some other thing,
some bold ignoble action's dear,
is friends with me or welcome here.²⁴*

Antistrophe B (365–375)

(Enter guard and Antigone from the countryside.)

CHORUS (chanting):

What in heaven is this inexplicable sight?
I cannot dispute what I see and pretend
that it isn't our daughter Antigone.
Unfortunate child!
Child of unfortunate Oedipus!
What's happening now?
Were you overtaken in folly, perhaps,
transgressing the laws of the king?

Anapests (376–383)

24. Literally, “may he never share my hearth or think like me.”

GUARD:

This here's the very one who did the deed, 384
caught in the act. Now where did Creon go?

CHORAL LEADER:

He's exiting the palace—

(Enter Creon from the palace.)

just in time.

CREON:

How's that? What makes my entrance opportune?

GUARD:

Lord, never swear a thing's impossible,
for second thoughts belie convictions. Once
I vowed you'd never see me here again. 390
I feared the dire threats you rained on me.
However, since no joy is quite as great
as one that comes entirely by surprise,
I'm here—albeit sworn contrariwise—
to bring this girl whom I've arrested for
committing burial. No lots were cast.
She was a gift that heaven sent to me
alone. Go on and cross-examine her
and pass your judgment. I've been justified
and freed at last from all these troubles, lord. 400

CREON:

But where was she arrested? Doing what?

GUARD:

She tried to bury him. That's all there is.

CREON:

Are you aware of what your statement means?

GUARD:

I saw her trying to bury him, the corpse
that you condemned. I think my meaning's clear.

CREON:

Exactly how was she observed and caught?

GUARD:

Here's how it happened. We returned to work
with your alarming threats still echoing.
We swept away the dust lying sprinkled on
the corpse. Then laying the oozing body bare, 410
we took our seats on top of windward hills,
avoiding its disgusting smell that way.
We poked each other roughly, promising
to kill the man who shirked his duty then.
We did so all the while the sunny disc
inhabited the middle sky and spread
its heat—but then a sudden storm descends.
It raises clouds of sand that block the sky
and fill the plain, removing foliage
from low-lying trees. The air is thick. We shield 420
our faces, waiting out the god-sent plague.
It lasts a while, and when it finally ends,
this child is visible. Her wailing's like
the piercing voice of some indignant bird
who sees her nestlings' bed bereft of young.
That's how she sounded, seeing the naked corpse.
She sobbed and keened and called her curses down
upon whoever laid the body bare.
She quickly sprinkled thirsty dust by hand,

then raised a finely crafted jug of bronze 430
and poured libations²⁵ thrice around the corpse.
We set ourselves in motion instantly
and trapped our quarry. She was not afraid.
We questioned her on this and previous
activities, and she admitted both.
That gave me joy *and* sorrow. Freeing oneself
from trouble *is* a very pleasant thing,
but bringing friends²⁶ misfortune causes pain.
For that, I'm sorry. Yet—I'm one who feels
that nothing's more important than my life! 440

CREON:

You there, still staring at the ground, do you
confess or claim you didn't do this thing?

ANTIGONE:

Confess? Oh, yes, his testimony's true.

CREON (to the guard):

Then you may scurry off to anywhere
you like. You're free. You've ducked a heavy charge.

(Exit guard toward the countryside. Creon addresses
Antigone.)

But you, were you aware that heralds had
proclaimed that act illegal? Yes or no?

25. Libations are liquid offerings poured on the ground in honor of a god or deceased person.

26. Presumably the guard thinks of Antigone as a "friend," despite her crime, since they are both Thebans. His humane attitude contrasts with Creon's.

ANTIGONE:

I knew. Why wouldn't I? Your words were clear.

CREON:

And yet you boldly overstepped the law?

ANTIGONE:

It wasn't Zeus who issued that decree. 450

The justice that resides with gods below
has never sanctioned practices like yours.

I didn't think a mortal man's decrees
possessed sufficient strength to nullify
the deities' secure, unwritten laws.²⁷

Their origin's not today or yesterday.

They live forever. No one knows their source.

I didn't mean to be condemned by gods
because I feared to ruffle human pride.

I knew without consulting your decrees 460

that I would die one day. Moreover, I
consider death before my time a gain.

For who with troubles numerous as mine
would not call dying young a benefit?

For me, the pain of suffering such a fate
is nothing. If, however, I allowed
my mother's son to lie unburied, *that*
would truly hurt. *This* doesn't hurt at all.

27. Antigone's invocation of eternal, unwritten laws is one of the most famous passages in Greek tragedy. Greek thought on the issue of absolute morality, as on so many others, was fluid. In another famous passage dealing with burials, Sophocles' contemporary Herodotus (3.38.4) asserts that variable human customs are the absolute rulers of human behavior. Antigone is not speaking as a representative of typical Greek beliefs but as an individual with a strong opinion.

If things I've done strike you as foolish acts,
perhaps a fool's defining foolishness.

470

CHORAL LEADER:

She's fierce as her ferocious father was.
She doesn't bend beneath adversity.

CREON:

But rigid arrogance is always first
to tumble. Isn't it the hardest piece
of fire-tempered iron we expect
to shatter suddenly or break in two?
I've found conversely little bits can tame
wild horses. Snorting pride is out of place
when one's a slave whose masters dwell nearby.
This girl's adept at hubris though. She proved
as much by breaking duly published laws. 480
Her second act of hubris was to laugh
and boast about her actions afterward.
Well, I'm a man no longer—she's the male,
if those rebellious actions go unchecked.
Although she is my sister's child and none
who tend my household Zeus²⁸ are closer kin,
she won't escape her evil destiny,
nor shall her sibling. She's complicit too
in planning this forbidden burial. 490
You! Summon her. I saw her recently,
inside. She seemed distracted, scarcely sane.
It happens. Minds devising evil schemes
in darkness testify against themselves.

28. A way of saying: "those who live under the same roof as me." Households had altars sacred to Zeus at which all members would pray and offer sacrifice. As Jocasta's daughter, Antigone is Creon's niece.

I hate it more, however, when you hear
convicted felons beautify their crimes.

ANTIGONE:

Besides my death, do you want something more?

CREON:

No. I'll be wholly satisfied with that.

ANTIGONE:

Then what's the point of waiting? Nothing you
can say will ever win my sympathy.

500

You're sure to find *my* words offensive too.

What's more, there couldn't be a finer cause
than caring for a brother's burial.

You'd hear these men approving what I say
except that fear has manacled their tongues.

To be a tyrant—what a happy state!

You say and do exactly what you please.

CREON:

Not one of these Cadmeans shares your view.

ANTIGONE:

They do. They're just tail-wagging hypocrites.

CREON:

Aren't you ashamed that no one takes your side?

510

ANTIGONE:

No. Honoring my brother's no disgrace.

CREON:

And yet a brother died opposing him.

ANTIGONE:

Indeed, my mother's son and father's too.

CREON:

Then aren't your actions impious toward him?

ANTIGONE:

I doubt we'll hear his lifeless corpse complain.

CREON:

If you equate their honors, don't be sure.

ANTIGONE:

His *brother's* lying dead; he's not some slave.

CREON:

Dead fighting him and ravaging this land!

ANTIGONE:

Still, Hades wants the customary rites.

CREON:

Good men and evil merit different rites.

520

ANTIGONE:

Who knows what's viewed as holy down below?

CREON:

Not even death turns enemies to friends.

ANTIGONE:

My nature calls for sharing love, not hate.

(Enter Ismene from the palace.)

CREON:

Then go below and love the spirits there!
No woman gets to rule while I'm alive.

CHORUS (chanting):

But look! There's Ismene in front
of the gates,

Anapests (526–530)

bathing in sisterly tears!
Storms from the cloud overhanging her brow
have driven the blood from her cheeks!

CREON:

You! Slinking viper-like around my house,
you've drained my powers surreptitiously.
I've nursed two curses unaware, it seems—
a revolution! Now, do you admit
your guilt in this or swear you didn't know?

531

ISMENE:

I'm guilty too if she agrees. I'm her
accomplice; I accept my share of blame.

ANTIGONE:

No! Justice won't abide your claim, since you
held back, and I accomplished this alone.

ISMENE:

When you're in trouble, I'm no longer shy.
I'll travel seas of suffering with you.

540

ANTIGONE:

The ghosts and Hades know whose act it was.
I don't love friends who offer only words.

ISMENE:

Oh please don't hinder me from joining you
in death and duly honoring the dead!

ANTIGONE:

You needn't die with me as though you shared
in deeds you didn't do. My death's enough.

ISMENE:

What life is dear to me that's lacking you?

ANTIGONE:

Ask Creon that. You guard his interests well.

ISMENE:

Why be so hurtful? Nothing's gained by that.

550

ANTIGONE:

That's true. I hurt myself when mocking you.

ISMENE:

There must be something I can do to help.

ANTIGONE:

Just save yourself. I won't be envious.

ISMENE:

What desolation! Not to share your fate!

ANTIGONE:

You've chosen life while I have chosen death.

ISMENE:

At least I spoke. My protest wasn't mute.

ANTIGONE:

Your views seemed fair to some. To others, mine.

ISMENE:

We both fell short of gaining what we sought.

ANTIGONE:

Be brave. You live. My spirit died some time ago. I'm ready now to serve the dead.

560

CREON:

Of these two children, one has recently become insane. The other raved from birth.

ISMENE:

One's inborn disposition changes for the worse, my lord, with constant suffering.

CREON:

Yours did in choosing evil friends and acts.

ISMENE:

What good's my lonely life apart from her?

CREON:

Don't mention her, for she no longer *is*.

ISMENE:

You're going to kill your son's intended bride?²⁹

CREON:

We'll find another fertile field to plow.

ISMENE:

You'll never find a better union though.

570

CREON:

I hate to burden sons with evil wives.

ANTIGONE:

Haemon, my love, your father wrongs you so!³⁰

CREON:

The thought of you and marriage sickens me.

29. Here it is revealed for the first time that Creon's son Haemon is engaged to marry Antigone. In another version of the myth, he was the most prominent victim of the Sphinx before Oedipus saved the day; cf. Apollodorus 3.54.

30. Manuscripts assign this line to Ismene, but some editions, starting with the Aldine of 1502, change the speaker to Antigone. The speaker calls Haemon her "dearest" one (*philtate* in Greek), and in the next line Creon mentions her marriage. On the other hand, there is no parallel in extant tragedy for such an interruption by a third person in the middle of a *stichomythia* (a passage with a rapid-fire exchange of iambic lines between two characters), and elsewhere Antigone seems oblivious to Haemon's existence. Nevertheless, I have given the line to Antigone because of Creon's remark. In my view, the phrase in line 573 (literally, "you and your marriage") cannot convey "you and the marriage of which you speak, i.e., your sister's." Some editors also reassign lines 574 and 576 from Ismene to Antigone or the choral leader, but I see no compelling reason for that change.

ISMENE:

You truly mean to rob your son of her?

CREON:

Hades will stop his wedding feast, not I.

ISMENE:

It's been decided then that she must die?

CREON:

That's right. We're in agreement. Servants, take
these girls inside and do so quickly. They
must now behave like women, free no more.

Even the bravest men are apt to flee 580
when they see Hades bearing down on them.

(Antigone and Ismene are escorted into the palace by
Creon's attendants. Creon stays, listening to the chorus
or lost in thought.)

CHORUS (singing):

When evil's absent life is blest. Strophe A (582–592)
The gods give others little rest.
Their ruin strips whole family trees
like blasts from stormy Thracian seas
when dark descends and winds attack.
The churning sands turn billows black,
and battered headlands holler back.

Of old, Labdacid³¹ sorrows grow. Antistrophe A (593–603)
They weigh upon the dead below.

31. The Labdacids are descendants of Cadmus' grandson, Labdacus, an early king of Thebes. They include Laius, Oedipus, and Antigone.

*No parent sets his children free.
Some god attacks relentlessly.
Now by the death gods' bloody blade,
mad speech and passions unallayed,
this family's last bright branch must fade.*

*What overarching human crime
could blunt your powers, Zeus, if sleep
that conquers all or passing time
can't touch the ageless king of steep
Olympus ever bright?
The law of present, past, and future states:
when greatness comes to mortals, ruin waits.*

Strophe B (604–614)

*Wide-ranging hope does many good,
but thoughtless passions lead astray.
One never learns until he's stood
beside the flame. What people say
is wise, if somewhat trite:*

Antistrophe B (615–625)

(Enter Haemon from the city.)

*The gods make mortals they've condemned suppose
that evil's good—then ruin's quick to close.*

CHORUS (chanting):

Look! Haemon, the last of your sons,
has arrived.

Anapests (626–630)

Do you think he's upset by Antigone's fate,
that of the girl he would marry,
aggrieved by the loss of his nuptials?

CREON:

We'll quickly learn and not need prophecy.
My boy, perhaps you heard the sentence I've

631

pronounced and come to scold your father now;
or are we friends no matter what I do?

HAEMON:

I'm yours, my father. So's the right to judge.
You make the rules, and I just follow them.
I'd never value any marriage more
than having your fine leadership as guide.

CREON:

Well-spoken, son, and take this rule to heart:
support your father's judgment every time. 640
There is a reason one entreats the gods
to bless his home with fine, submissive sons.
It's so they'll help him punish enemies
and treat his friends like second fathers. What
is there to say of men with worthless sons?
They've grown a bumper crop of toil and pain
and give their enemies a belly laugh.
Now, boy, don't ever let the pleasure that
women provide destroy your common sense.
Keep this in mind: it's chilly comfort when 650
an evil female shares your bed at home.
The deepest wounds are made by evil friends.
So spit the traitor out. Release the girl
to find another spouse in Hades' realm.
I apprehended her in flagrant crime,
the only citizen defying my law.
I cannot fail to keep my public pledge.
I'm going to kill her, notwithstanding hymns
to kindred Zeus.³² If I let kinsmen act

32. See note 28. Another allusion to the fact that as members of the same household, Antigone and Creon worship at the same altar.

disgracefully, then what will others do? 660
 The man who handles family matters well
 is apt to be an upright citizen.
 Those other ones, the proud who shatter laws
 or try to tell their rulers what to do,
 have little chance of winning praise from me.
 One must obey the city's chosen man
 in major matters, minor, fair and foul.
 The citizen who does inspires trust.
 He takes and gives commands with equal ease.
 When storms of battle rage, he stands his ground, 670
 a steady comrade, virtuous and just,
 but there's no greater curse than anarchy.
 It's what destroys the city, overturns
 the home, and breaks the allied battle line.
 Obedience, however—that's the thing
 that saves the lives of countless righteous men.
 Good order, then, is what we must defend—
 and never letting women take command.
 I'll yield my powers, if I must, to men.
 I won't be called a woman's underling. 680

CHORAL LEADER:

Unless advancing age has dulled our wits,
 we think that what you say makes perfect sense.

HAEMON:

Father, the gods implanted intellects
 in men, and they're the finest things we own.
 I couldn't prove that anything you say
 is wrong, and may I never wish to try!
 But someone else might make a valid point.
 I naturally observe how people talk
 and act and criticisms aimed at you.

Your look alone on hearing words in which 690
 you take no pleasure frightens citizens,
 but I can listen, virtually unseen.
 That's why I've heard the city's cry. This child,
 it says, of all our women least deserves
 disgraceful death. Her deeds are glorious.
 A girl who wouldn't let her brother, slain
 in battle, lie exposed for savage dogs
 and passing birds to mutilate—what else
 does she deserve but honor bright as gold?
 Such are the dark and quiet words that spread. 700
 Father, there's nothing worth as much to me
 as your good fortune is—in all you do.
 What greater ornament do children have
 than fame of fathers? Fathers, fame of sons?
 I merely ask you not to take the stance
 that what you say and nothing else is right.
 Lay open one who acts uniquely wise,
 as though you couldn't match his soul or tongue—
 you'll always find some emptiness within.
 Learning new truths and seeming flexible 710
 does not embarrass one who's truly wise.
 You see how trees that bend by wintry streams
 preserve their smallest twigs, while root and branch
 of those resisting perish utterly.
 When sailors keep their halyards ever taut
 and never furl their sails, their voyage ends
 with rowing benches floating upside-down.
 Step back from anger. Let your feelings change.
 If one can tolerate a younger man's
 advice, I'd call being born omniscient best. 720
 The scales, however, rarely tilt that way.
 Thus it becomes a good and seemly thing
 to profit from what others have to say.

CHORAL LEADER:

Lord, if his words have merit, learn from them;

(To Haemon.)

the same to you. Both sides have spoken well.

CREON:

Shall men of many years like us be taught
the proper way to think by such a boy?

HAEMON:

There's nothing wrong with that. Although I'm young,
consider my attainments, not my age.

CREON:

"Attainments?" Reverence for criminals?

730

HAEMON:

I never honor people doing wrong.

CREON:

But hasn't *she* succumbed to that disease?

HAEMON:

Her fellow citizens in Thebes say no.

CREON:

Will *they* tell *us* what orders I'm to give?

HAEMON:

Who's talking like an adolescent now?

CREON:

I *am* the only one who rules this land.

HAEMON:

A city's not the property of one.

CREON:

Does not the man in power rule the state?

HAEMON:

You'd play the part of desert monarch well.

CREON:

You're fighting on the woman's side, it seems.

740

HAEMON:

Then you're a woman. I'm concerned for you.

CREON:

Will you debate your father, shameless brat!

HAEMON:

When I observe you acting badly, yes!

CREON:

To seek respect for my position's wrong?

HAEMON:

You seek respect by disrespecting gods!

CREON:

How you disgust me, woman's underling!

HAEMON:

At least I don't submit to ugly acts.

CREON:

Your every word is on the girl's behalf.

HAEMON:

And yours and mine and holy ones' below.

CREON:

You'll never marry her while she's alive.

750

HAEMON:

Why then she'll die and end another's life.³³

CREON:

You threaten me? You've gotten very bold!

HAEMON:

Is pointing out stupidity a threat?

CREON:

You'll rue your stupid rhetoric yourself.

HAEMON:

Since you're my father, I'll not call you mad.

CREON:

Don't mince your words with me, you woman's slave.

HAEMON:

You like to talk, but never hear a thing.

CREON:

Oh really? Hear me now and rest assured
you'll not enjoy insulting me for long.

33. An ambiguous statement that is never clarified. Haemon probably means that Antigone's death would end his life, either literally or figuratively, but Creon thinks that Haemon is threatening him.

Bring out the hated creature! Let her die
at once, before her bridegroom's very eyes.

760

HAEMON:

That isn't going to happen! Don't suppose
that she will die while I stand idly by.
You'll never look upon my face again,
so rave away to your compliant friends.

(Exit Haemon toward the countryside.)

CHORAL LEADER:

The man stormed off in anger, lord. When one
so young is feeling hurt, he's dangerous.

CREON:

Oh, let him go and plan heroic deeds.
He'll never extricate these girls from death.

CHORAL LEADER:

Are you intent on killing *both* of them?

770

CREON:

No, just the one with dirty hands. Good point.

CHORAL LEADER:

What sort of death have you decided on?

CREON:

I'll take her somewhere people never go
and hide her in a rocky cave alive,
leaving a little food to ward off guilt.
The state will not incur pollution then,
and there, as Hades' devotee, she'll pray
to him to fashion some escape from death

or otherwise discover finally
that honoring the dead's a waste of time.

780

(Enter Antigone with guards. She is being led away to
the cave.)

CHORUS (singing):

*O god who's never lost a fight,
lord Eros,³⁴ who descends and wreaks
havoc on wealth and spends the night
asleep on girlish cheeks,
you find a way to cross the sea
and reach the farthest wilderness.
Not even deathless gods are free
from powers you possess,
nor anyone of mortal kind.
In gaining you they lose their mind.*

Strophe A (781–790)

*You turn a just man's thought to sin
involving him in deep disgrace.
The quarrel between these next of kin
is just another case.
Desire lurking in the eye
of lovely maidens overawes.
It wields authority on high,
among the greatest laws.
Aphrodite likes to play,
and being a god she gets her way.*

Antistrophe A (791–800)

34. Eros is the Greek Cupid, the personification of sexual love. The chorus, somewhat obtusely, sees Haemon's infatuation with the lovely Antigone as an adequate explanation for the ill will between him and Creon. The invocation of Eros begins an elaborate structure of metrically matching strophes and antistrophes.

CHORUS (chanting):

Now I—even I!—am transported beyond custom and law as I witness these things.
There's no damming the font of my tears when I see
Antigone making her way
to the chamber where everyone sleeps.

ANTIGONE (singing):

*Behold me, fellow countrymen,
my final journey has begun.
I'll never see the sun again,
since Hades, lulling everyone,
leads me living to the shore
of Acheron,³⁵ where I'll reside
deprived of marriage evermore,
deprived of hymns,³⁶ the river's bride.*

CHORUS (chanting):

And so you're departing with glory
and praise
to an underground chamber for corpses, although
you haven't been struck by a wasting disease.
Your death isn't one that was earned with a sword.
You're freely descending to Hades alive,
unique among mortals that way.

ANTIGONE (singing):

I've heard about the Tantalid

35. The Acheron is a river in the underworld.

36. Hymns in honor of the bride were composed and performed at weddings of the wealthy. Antigone's complaint is that she will never be the subject of such a hymn.

*queen Niobe's³⁷ unkind demise,
whom rocks like clinging vines undid
where Sipylus's³⁸ towers rise.
She wastes away mid rain and snow
that never cease, and wets her chest
with constant tears. My fate bestows
on me a similar kind of rest.*

CHORUS (chanting):

Yet she was a goddess, begotten divine, Anapests (834–838)
and we're merely mortals, all destined to die.
Still it's a glorious honor to hear
of sorrows you share with the godlike of old
in your life and your manner of dying.

ANTIGONE (singing):

*I'm mocked, O gods! Yes, it begins Strophe C (839–852)
why can't you wait until I go?
O city, prosperous citizens,
and grove where Dirce's waters flow,
you are my witnesses of how
my friends and laws abandon me.
I near my stony barrow now,
my novel grave, O misery!
That's where I'll dwell, a fit homestead
for neither living beings nor dead.*

37. Niobe was a daughter of Tantalus, native of Lydia, and queen of Thebes by virtue of her marriage to Amphion. Her twelve or fourteen children were slain by Artemis and Apollo when she boasted of being more blessed in children than their mother, Leto. Weeping ceaselessly, she was transported by the gods to Lydia, where she was turned into a rocky cliff resembling a woman's face, with cascading streams for tears.

38. Sipylus, a mountain in Lydia.

CHORUS (singing):

*You've gone as far as any dare
But now you fall upon your knees
before the throne of justice, where
you pay your father's penalties.*

Strophe D (853–856)

ANTIGONE (singing):

*You've touched my greatest sorrow there,
my triple sadness: father's woes,
the fate the famed Labdacids share,
the marriage mother blindly chose,
self-generated intercourse,
from which this wretched girl was born.
Now cursed, unwed, I go perforce
to be with them, alas! and mourn
your marriage, brother, source of strife.
In dying you also took my life.*

Antistrophe C (857–871)

CHORUS (singing):

*Piety's a pious cause,
but those in whom much power lies
never let you break their laws.
A willful passion's your demise.*

Antistrophe D (872–875)

ANTIGONE (singing):

*My friendless, unlamented, unwed journey
has begun.*

Epode³⁹ (876–882)

*Henceforth I may not look upon this holy lamp, the sun.
Which friends have come to mourn my lot? There isn't anyone.*

CREON:

If songs and lamentations facing death

883

39. An *epode* is a coda, a brief metrical or musical passage at the end of one or more pairs of strophes and antistrophes.

did any good, no one would ever stop.
Take her away at once, enclosing her
in such a vaulted tomb as I've described,
and there abandon her to die, if that's
her fate, or be a living corpse within.
This maiden's case is closed. Our hands are clean,
but she'll no longer live above the ground. 890

ANTIGONE:

O tomb and bridal chamber, hollow cell
with sleepless guards, I go to you to join
a larger number, friends of mine to whom
Persephone⁴⁰ has shown her kindly face
among the dead. The last and saddest, I
descend before my fated time, and yet
my consolation is that going there
I shall receive a loving welcome from
my father, you, my mother, brother dear.
For it was I who bathed your corpses, dressed 900
them properly, and poured libations at
your tombstones. Now for taking care of you,
dear Polyneices, *this* is my reward.
And yet the wise would say I acted well.
Suppose I were a mother or my spouse
lay dead and decomposing—I would not
have labored so, defying my fellow citizens.
Now what's the logic governing my words?
When husbands die, you find another one.
You have another child if one is lost. 910
But with my parents down in Hades' house,

40. Persephone, the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, goddess of grain, was Hades' wife and the queen of the dead. She was worshiped at Eleusis and generally associated with hope for a happy afterlife.

I'll never see another brother bloom.
 I gave you special honor based on such
 a rationale,⁴¹ but Creon thought I erred.
 He found my acts outrageous, brother dear.
 And now he's leading me away by force,
 a virgin whom no wedding hymn will praise.
 No chance to marry, none to raise a child,
 I go ill-fated, friendless, still alive,
 to join the dead residing underground.
 Is there some holy law I've overturned?
 In my distress, I look to heaven still,
 but why? What ally's there to call upon
 when pious actions make me impious?
 The gods may judge my sentence good, and I
 will learn by suffering how I've sinned; but if
 these men are wrong, I wish them nothing worse
 than what they most unjustly do to me.

920

41. Antigone's argument that her brother is irreplaceable has struck many as jarringly inappropriate. Whether it is or not, it is almost certainly an imitation of a similar speech in Herodotus' *Histories* (3.119), a work that was probably circulating in Athens when Sophocles wrote *Antigone*. In the Herodotean passage, King Darius of Persia condemns a supposed traitor, Intaphernes, and all his male relatives to death, but Mrs. Intaphernes begs for mercy so pathetically that Darius agrees to spare one life. She chooses her brother, explaining that husbands and sons are replaceable but her brother is not, because their parents are dead. Darius is pleased by her logical turn of mind and spares her eldest son together with her brother. In Antigone's case, no choice is involved, and her statement that she would *not* bury a son or husband is difficult to reconcile with her appeal to eternal, unwritten laws. Was Sophocles himself responsible for this literary allusion, or is it the work of an inept interpolator? The best evidence that the passage is genuine is that Aristotle cites it without questioning its authenticity or suitability (*Rhetoric* 1417a32–33), but others maintain that it obviously mars the play. Readers must decide for themselves.

CHORUS (chanting):

Identical tempests still batter her soul!

Anapests (929–943)

CREON (chanting):

All the more reason attendants will weep
if they're slow in completing their task.

ANTIGONE (chanting):

Your pronouncement amounts to a sentence of death.

CREON (chanting):

I've nothing to say to encourage you.
My decision is final in this.

ANTIGONE (chanting):

O fatherland, city of Thebes,
gods of my ancestors, see!
I am hurried away to my death!
O look at me, rulers of Thebes,
the single survivor, the daughter of kings.
See what I suffer, and suffer by whom,
on account of my pious behavior.

(Exeunt Antigone and guards toward the
countryside.)

CHORUS (singing):

*Danaa⁴² traded the light of the day
for chambers of bronze; she was hidden away,
in a tomblike rotunda where she had to stay*

Strophe A (944–954)

42. Danaa, a princess of Argos, was imprisoned by her father because an oracle had said that her son would kill him. Despite this, Zeus visited her in the form of a golden vapor. She bore the hero Perseus, who eventually did kill his grandfather, accidentally, with an errant discus throw.

*despite her nobility, child.
 She tended to Zeus's outpouring of gold.
 The power of destiny can't be controlled,
 for nothing escapes it, no fleet or stronghold,
 no money or militant might.*

*Edonian*⁴³ *Dryas's hot-tempered child*⁴⁴ Antistrophe A (955–965)
*was shackled by Bacchus,*⁴⁵ *the god he reviled,
 in a prison of stone to diminish his wild
 madness and burgeoning strength.
 He realized his madness at last, when he learned
 the price of free speech where a god is concerned.
 For he stopped the wild women and fires they burned,
 and the flute-loving Muses went mad.*

*Salmydessus,*⁴⁶ *the Thracian metropolis lies* Strophe B (966–978)
*where the Bosphorus coast and Symplegades*⁴⁷ *rise,*

43. The Edonians were a Thracian tribe associated with the worship of Dionysus (also known as Bacchus).

44. "Dryas's hot-tempered child" was Lycurgus, a Thracian king who attacked Dionysus and his Maenads and was duly punished. According to the *Iliad* (6.130–140), he chased a terrified Dionysus into the sea but was blinded by an indignant Zeus and died shortly thereafter. The story was elaborated in various ways by later poets. The version to which Sophocles refers is not found in extant sources. Evidently it depicted the Muses as the instruments of Lycurgus' punishment.

45. Bacchus is an alternative name for Dionysus.

46. Salmydessus, a town in Thrace on the southwest coast of the Black Sea.

47. The Symplegades are the Clashing Rocks, small islands at the entrance to the Black Sea that, according to legend, rushed together and crushed ships passing between them. There is a problem with the transmission of Sophocles' text at this point. The original apparently referred to the Symplegades by their alternative name, the Kuaneai or Dark Rocks, and added some description that cannot be restored.

*where the native god Ares saw Phineid eyes*⁴⁸
endure a detestable wound.

*Made blind by a barbarous stepmother's act,
if the orbs of their eyes had their way they'd exact
revenge for the crime, so unjustly attacked
by bloodthirsty hands and steel pins.*

*They grieved and lamented until they
were hoarse,* Antistrophe B (979–987)
*regretting their birth and their mother's divorce.
The ancient Erechtheid*⁴⁹ *seed was her source,
though born in a faraway cave
and nursed amid storms of her father until
a Boread,*⁵⁰ *swift as a horse on a hill,
descended from gods, she was made to fulfill
what the Fates had in store for her, child.*

(Enter Tiresias from the city, led by a young boy.)

48. “Phineid eyes” are the eyes of the children of Phineus. The chorus refers to the story of the blind prophet whom the Argonauts saved from the Harpies. Various stories about Phineus were treated in two or three lost plays by Sophocles. In the version to which the chorus refers, Phineus is married to Cleopatra, the daughter of Boreas, the North Wind, and Oreithyia, daughter of Erechtheus, an early king of Athens. After fathering two sons with Cleopatra, Phineus leaves her for another woman, possibly named Eidothea. A stereotypical stepmother, she is obsessed with hatred for her stepsons and blinds them as a punishment for some alleged crime. It is not known how the myth played out from there. Allusions in this song suggest that Cleopatra and her sons were imprisoned after the blinding. Possibly they were rescued by the Argonauts. The sons may have been cured by Asclepius. See Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 349–56.

49. As the daughter of Oreithyia, Cleopatra was Erechtheus' granddaughter.

50. This Cleopatra was a Boread, a child of Boreas, the North Wind.

TIRESIAS:

A common road has brought us here, O lords
of Thebes. We share a single pair of eyes.
This pathway's such that blind men need a guide.

990

CREON:

Is something new, old man Tiresias?

TIRESIAS:

You'll soon find out. Just heed my mantic words.

CREON:

I've never disregarded your advice.

TIRESIAS:

That's how you've kept the city sailing straight.

CREON:

I know firsthand how useful you can be.

TIRESIAS:

Beware! You walk the razor edge of fate.

CREON:

What an alarming thing to say! How so?

TIRESIAS:

My art discovered signs that tell the tale.
I'd gone to where I practice augury,⁵¹

51. Prophetic priests like Tiresias had two main ways to ascertain the will of the gods: the behavior of birds, the pseudo-science known as augury, and examination of the innards of sacrificed animals. Signs of both kinds have told Tiresias that the gods are angry at Creon's behavior and preparing to punish him.

a place that harbors birds of every kind.	1000
There what I heard were unfamiliar strains.	
A foul barbaric frenzy filled the birds.	
I knew a war of bloody talons raged.	
The noise of flapping wings was proof. Alarmed,	
I acted quickly, ranging portions on	
the altar's glowing coals. Hephaestus ⁵² failed.	
The portions wouldn't catch the flame. They lay	
in ashes, melting, oozing grease. They smoked	
and spat. The liver burst, and folds of fat	
dissolving left the victims' bones exposed.	1010
This boy described those failed prophetic rites	
and lack of hopeful signs to me. He showed	
the way. I do the same for others now.	
The city's deathly ill, and you're to blame!	
Our hearths and altars, each and every one,	
reek of the flesh that dogs and vultures tear	
from Oedipus's hapless, fallen son.	
The gods reject our sacrificial prayers.	
The bones we burn on altars blaze in vain,	1020
nor do the birds that eat the bloody fat	
of human beings sing songs that augur well.	
Consider matters carefully, my son.	
It is the common fate of men to err,	
but when an error's committed, one can still	
be wise and prosper, <i>if</i> he remedies	
the harm and doesn't prove inflexible.	
Self-will's a common cause of fatal slips.	
Respect the dead. Don't bother one who's passed.	
Does killing corpses count as valor now?	1030

52. Here again the god Hephaestus stands for fire; cf. note 11.

My words are meant to help. The sweetest fruits
of learning come from taking good advice.

CREON:

Old man, how all you holy archers aim
your arrows here!

(He indicates his own chest.)

Your mantic art has built
a business based on me. I'm bought and sold
like precious cargo purchased overseas.
Seek profits elsewhere! Silver, if you like,
is found in Sardis, India abounds
in gold, but there's no way you'll bury him.
Not even if the eagles kept by Zeus
dropped bits of human flesh around his throne
would I in fear of such defilement let
that man be buried. This I know for sure:
no mortal act contaminates a god.
Tiresias, old man, you clever ones
have often brought disgrace upon yourselves
by selling words that make the foul look fair.

1040

TIRESIAS:

Pheu!⁵³

Does anybody know or understand . . .

CREON:

Know what? What commonplace is coming next?

53. *Phay-oo*, a Greek interjection expressing grief or anger.

TIRESIAS:

Good counsel's your most precious property.

1050

CREON:

And lack of careful thought is full of grief.

TIRESIAS:

And that's the illness you're infected by.

CREON:

I wouldn't want to call a prophet names.

TIRESIAS:

And yet you call my prophesying false?

CREON:

For prophecy's a silver-loving art.

TIRESIAS:

And tyranny's in love with shameless gain.

CREON:

You criticize your ruler now, you know.

TIRESIAS:

It's thanks to me that you're a ruler still.

CREON:

You're clever, seer, fond of mischief though.

TIRESIAS:

You're tempting me to let my secrets out.

1060

CREON:

Please do, provided money's not involved.

TIRESIAS:

It isn't—not for you at any rate.

CREON:

Just be advised: my judgment's not for sale.

TIRESIAS:

There's something *you* should be advised of too.

Before you finish many breathless laps
beneath the sunny sky, you'll pay a price:

your flesh and blood, a corpse for corpses. One,
belonging to the upper world, you cast

below, cruelly buried underground,

while robbing lower gods of what *is* theirs,

1070

a corpse denied its proper, holy rites,

which rites are neither your concern nor that

of higher gods. You act outrageously,

and therefore Hades' executioners,

the gods' destructive Furies, lie in wait

to tangle you in evils you create.

Now see if I sound mercenary. Time

is running short. It won't be long before

the wails of men and women shake your house.

The other states are all convulsed with hate.⁵⁴

1080

Their mangled sons receive their final rites

from dogs and beasts, or else some winged bird

defiles the city's hearth with putrid flesh.

You're right. You've angered me, and I direct

54. A well-established part of the tradition was that Creon also refused to return the bodies of fallen Argive warriors for burial. Led by Theseus, however, the Athenian army rescued the corpses and returned them to their families. Euripides' *Suppliant Women* depicts these events; see appendix 2.

my anger's shafts at no one's heart but yours.
I've steady hands. You won't escape their sting.
Take us away, my boy, we're heading home.
Let him unload his wrath on younger men
or learn perhaps to keep a civil tongue
and nurture better thoughts than he does now.

1090

(Exit Tiresias toward the city.)

CHORAL LEADER:

He's left us, lord, with dire prophecies.
Not once since I exchanged my sable locks
for gray have any of the warning words
with which he's rocked the city proven false.

CREON:

I'm well aware and deeply troubled too.
To yield is hard, and yet resistance means
being crushed by ruin. That's my other choice!

CHORAL LEADER:

Be counseled well, Menoeceus's son.

CREON:

Just say what action's needed, I'll obey.

CHORAL LEADER:

First go and free the maiden underground,
then give the body left exposed a tomb.⁵⁵

1100

55. Creon reverses this order, burying Polyneices first and then entering Antigone's prison. It is possible to suppose that the outcome of the play would have been different if he had gone to Antigone first, as the chorus suggests.

CREON:

That's truly your opinion? I should yield?

CHORAL LEADER:

And quickly, lord! Fleet-footed god-sent grief
often disrupts a heedless man's designs.

CREON:

It's hard, but I'll abandon my resolve
and act—not struggle with necessity.

CHORAL LEADER:

Don't leave the work for others. Do it now!

CREON:

I'll go without delay. You servants, one
and all, act quickly! Taking blades in hand
and making haste, ascend that looming hill.

III O

(Pointing.)

I've changed my mind. I'll loosen bonds I tied.
Yes, I myself shall set the maiden free.
I've realized it's always best to live
your life respecting well-established laws.

(Exeunt Creon and servants toward countryside.)

CHORUS (singing joyously):

*O god with different names in use,
who glorified the Theban maid,*⁵⁶

Strophe A (III6–II25)

56. Dionysus, a.k.a. Bacchus, was the son of Zeus and the "Theban maid" Semele, one of Cadmus' granddaughters.

*the son of lord of thunder, Zeus,
 you come to vaunted Italy's aid
 and are the steady shield
 of Deo's valleys⁵⁷ open wide
 and Thebes, the Bacchants' motherland,
 O Bacchus, town where you reside
 beside the stream Ismenus⁵⁸ and
 the raging serpent's field.⁵⁹*

*You're seen above the double peak,⁶⁰ Antistrophe A (1126–1135)
 through the torches' smoky glare
 on heights that nymphs from caverns⁶¹ seek,
 the Bacchic girls who wander where
 Castalia's waters⁶² rise.
 The ivy-clad Nysaeon hills,⁶³
 the verdant coast, the vineyards' joy,*

57. Deo is Demeter. Her wide-open valleys would probably be the land around Eleusis, the site of her principal temple, which drew worshipers from all over Greece.

58. Ismenus was a stream that flowed past Thebes.

59. A reference to the myth that Cadmus laid claim to the territory of Thebes by killing a great serpent and sowing its teeth to produce a band of armed warriors.

60. The “double peak” refers to the topography of Apollo's temple at Delphi. Two steep, rocky peaks known as the Phaedriades or Glistening Ones rose behind it. Dionysus was worshiped at Delphi during the winter.

61. “Nymphs from caverns” is a loose translation of *Korykiai . . . nymphai*, Corycian nymphs—that is, nymphs who lived in what was known as the Corycian Cave on Mount Parnassus.

62. The spring Castalia on Mount Parnassus was sacred to Apollo and the Muses.

63. The name Nysa was given to a number of places, mainly mountains, identified as the home or birthplace of Dionysus, “god of Nysa.” Here the reference may be to wine-growing hills on the northwest coast of Euboea.

*send you to Theban streets that fill
with holy shouts, Euoi! Euoi!*⁶⁴
ascending to the skies.

*Most of all you honor Thebes,
your stricken mother's*⁶⁵ *town.
Now come to us on cleansing foot;
there's illness all around.
Cross the sea, or if you're on
Parnassian heights, come down.*

Strophe B (1136–1145)

*You lead the dance of fiery stars
and heed nocturnal cries.
Lord, child of Zeus, appear and have
your Maenads by your side
to dance and sing all night and praise
the treasures you provide.*

Antistrophe B (1146–1154)

(Enter messenger from the countryside.)

MESSENGER:

Amphion's⁶⁶ neighbors, Cadmus's as well,
I'll never praise or blame a person's life
as though it stood on steady feet, secure.
For fortune likes to set the wretched man
upright and knock the happy person down.
No prophet offers certainties to men.
Most people envied Creon once, I think.

1160

64. Pronounced *you-oy*, a joyous cry associated with Dionysian festivals.

65. "Your stricken mother" refers to Dionysus' mother, Semele. Tricked by Hera into demanding that Zeus come to her in his divine form, she was incinerated by his radiance or simply died of fright.

66. Amphion was an early king of Thebes.

He saved Cadmeia's land from enemies,
acquired kingly powers, steered the state.
What's more, his noble seed was bearing sons.
Now all of that has vanished. Life itself
is meaningless when pleasure's gone. To me
a joyless person's just a breathing corpse.
So go and gather wealth in mansions. Live
the life of royalty. I wouldn't give
the shadow that my smoky fire casts
to purchase goods in which no joy is found.

1170

CHORAL LEADER:

What is this royal grief you've come to share?

MESSENGER:

People have died. The living caused their deaths.

CHORAL LEADER:

Who did the killing? Who lies dying? Speak!

MESSENGER:

Haemon by self-inflicted hemorrhage.⁶⁷

CHORAL LEADER:

His father's handiwork or all his own?

MESSENGER:

His own. His father's violence drove him mad.

CHORAL LEADER:

O priest, your prophecy has proven true!

67. The pun is contained in the Greek: *Haimon* . . . *haimassetai*, literally "Haemon is bloodied."

MESSENGER:

There's other news you'll need to think about.

(Enter Eurydice from the palace.)

CHORAL LEADER:

But wait! I see that Creon's wife, the poor
Eurydice, is here. She's either heard
about her son or enters now by chance. 1180

EURYDICE:

My fellow townsmen, I was just about
to leave the palace, going forth to greet
Athena, when I overheard your talk.
The gates were fastened. I undid the bolts,
and then a mournful interjection struck
my ears, and I collapsed in sudden fear,
unconscious, draped on serving women's arms.
And so, would you repeat your story now? 1190
Go on. I've often heard bad news before.

MESSENGER:

I'll speak, dear lady. I was there. I'll tell
the truth without omitting anything.
Why comfort you with words that later on
will prove me false? The truth is always best.
I helped your husband find his way across
the plain until we reached its farthest end
where Polyneices' dog-torn body lay.
We prayed that Hecate⁶⁸ and Pluto⁶⁹ check

68. An underworld goddess associated with Persephone.

69. Pluto, "the wealthy one," is another name for Hades, lord of the dead.

their anger graciously, then gave the corpse— 1200
 or what was left of it—a sacred bath
 and burned it, lighting freshly gathered twigs.
 We made a lofty tomb of native earth,
 then headed toward the maiden's rocky cave,
 the wedding suite prepared for her and Death.
 From far away somebody heard the sound
 of shrill lament from that unhallowed room
 and came to master Creon saying so.
 Then coming ever closer, he himself
 heard garbled cries of horrible distress 1210
 and finally spoke despairingly: "Oh no!"
 he cried, "Am I a prophet then, and this
 the worst of paths I've ever started down?
 That's Haemon's sobbing voice I hear. Be quick,
 attendants. Once you reach the vaulted tomb,
 slip through the fissure where the boulders meet,
 go to the inner chamber's door and see
 if Haemon's there or if the gods deceive."
 We did our frightened master's bidding then,
 examining the cavern end to end. 1220
 At last we saw her hanging there. A noose
 of finely woven linen gripped her neck.
 The boy was hugging her around the waist.
 He wept and cursed his bride's infernal death,
 his father's deeds, his ill-starred marriage bed.
 When Creon spotted him he groaned, then stepped
 inside, and breaking down in tears cried out:
 "What's this you've done, you stubborn fool? What thought
 possessed you? What misfortune drove you mad?⁷⁰
 Come out, my child, I'm humbly begging you." 1230

70. It is unclear whether Creon's questions are addressed to Haemon or to Antigone.

The boy just stared with angry eyes and then
spat in his father's face without a word.
He drew his jagged, two-edged sword but missed.
His father lunged away, and so, poor soul,
he turned his anger inward, braced himself,
and drove his weapon cleanly through his chest.
He fell, still conscious, trying with failing arms
to hug the girl while gushing streams transformed
her cheek from lucent white to scarlet red.
He lies, poor corpse, upon another corpse,
a husband now, in Hades anyway.

1240

(Exit Eurydice into the palace.)

His story shows that thoughtless actions are
the greatest evil known to man by far.

CHORAL LEADER:

What do you make of *that*? The lady's gone.
She left without a word of any kind.

MESSENGER:

That also startled me, but it's my hope
that hearing how her son had suffered, she
was loath to weep in public. Once inside,
she'll share her private grief with household maids.
She's too mature for doing something rash.

1250

CHORAL LEADER:

Perhaps. Yet too much silence worries me
as much as do displays of futile grief.

MESSENGER:

I'll go inside the palace then and see
if she's withholding something, some design

her seething heart conceals. You've spoken well.
Excessive silence often bodes grave ill.

(Exit messenger into the palace. Enter Creon from the countryside, carrying the dead Haemon.)

CHORUS (chanting):

And now it's our ruler himself

who arrives!

Anapests (1257–1260)

If it's proper to comment, we think that he carries
a vivid reminder of ruin that came
not from abroad but his personal folly.

CREON (singing):

The deadly sins of minds that anger blurs! Strophe A (1261–1269)

See kinsmen here, the slain, their murderers.

My youngest son, what grief my heart endures!

You're dead and gone, the folly mine, not yours.

CHORAL LEADER:

Your grasp of justice comes a little late.

1270

CREON (singing):

I've learned my lessons painfully.

Strophe B (1271–1277)

Some god, some overwhelming force,

struck from above, impelling me

to take a harsh, barbaric course.

He kicked and overturned my bliss.

All human labors come to this.

(Indicating Haemon's corpse.)

MESSENGER:

O lord, the sorrows that you have and have

1278

in store! You have a heavy burden now.
Within your home, you'll likely witness more. 1280

CREON:
What greater evil follows evils here?

MESSENGER:
Your wife has died, that corpse's mother—died
in misery from newly opened wounds.

CREON (singing):
Aa-aah!
Death's unforgiving harbor, why
do you Antistrophe A (1284–1292)
keep killing me? Ill herald, tell me true.
Although I'm dead, come slaughter me anew.
What female victim joins the bloody queue?

(The palace gates open, revealing the dead Eurydice.)

CHORAL LEADER:
See for yourself. The doors are open now. 1293

CREON (singing):
An evil's here, a second one. Antistrophe B (1294–1300)
What further blow has fate in store?
Just now these hands released my son,
and now I see there's something more.
Another corpse comes into view.
Mother and son, I weep for you!

MESSENGER:
Before the altar, sharpened sword in hand, 1301
she quenched the light beneath her eyelids, first

bewailing dead Megareus's⁷¹ fate,
then this boy's too, and last your evil deeds.
You are, she said, your children's murderer.

CREON (singing):

Aa-aah!

I shake with dread. Please, someone, pull Strophe C (1306–1311)
a two-edged sword and strike my chest,
a worthless man whose life is full
of grief and wretchedness.

MESSENGER:

Before she died, this woman placed the blame 1312
for all these fatal accidents on you.

CREON:

How did she come to such a bloody end?

MESSENGER:

A self-inflicted wound. She heard about
this boy's pathetic death and stabbed her womb.

CREON (singing):

Aa-aah! This guilt cannot be fixed Strophe D (1317–1325)
upon another man.
I am the one on whose account
the slaughter all began.

71. Megareus, called Menoeceus in other sources, was a son of Creon who died in the run-up to the battle between Eteocles and Polyneices. In Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, Tiresias prophesies that the city will be saved if Megareus sacrifices himself. Although Creon urges him to flee, Megareus refuses. He climbs a tower and cuts his own throat; see appendix 2.

*I'm less than nothing. Lead me off
as quickly as you can.*

CHORAL LEADER:

You've spoken well, if bad admits of good. 1326
Quick steps are best when evil's underfoot.

CREON (singing):

Now, most lovely death, appear! Antistrophe C (1328–1333)
Bring an end to this display
of misery, relieve my fear
of seeing another day!

CHORAL LEADER:

That lies ahead. There's present work to do. 1334
The men in charge will care for other things.

CREON:

My prayer encompassed everything I want.

CHORAL LEADER:

You shouldn't pray at all. For mortal men
there's no escaping evil destiny.

CREON (singing):

Take me away! My son, I never Antistrophe D (1339–1346)
wished to see you dead,
nor you. (Indicating Eurydice.) I cannot say for which
of two my tears are shed.
I handled things all wrong. Hard fate
has leapt upon my head.

(Exeunt Creon and attendants into palace.)

CHORUS (chanting):

Wisdom's the ultimate source

of our happiness,

Anapests (1347–1353)

and never committing irreverent acts

in matters involving the gods.

Bold words of the boastful are punished

with blows that are equally bold.

They've taught us to cultivate wisdom.

It comes with growing old.

Appendix 1.

Guide to Pronunciation

- Acheron (Ak'-uh-ron): river in the underworld.
- Amphion (Am-fi'-un): king who built the walls of Thebes.
- Antigone (An-tig'-uh-nē): daughter of Oedipus.
- Aphrodite (Af-rō-dī'-tē): goddess of love.
- Ares (Air'-ēz): god of war.
- Argive (Are'-gīv'): from Argos, a kingdom in southern Greece.
- Bacchants (Bah'-kahnts'): women followers of Dionysus.
- Bacchus (Bah'-kus): a.k.a. Dionysus, god of wine and revelry.
- Boread (Bor'-rē-id): child of Boreas, god of the North Wind.
- Bosporus (Bahs'-por-us): narrow strait at the entrance to the Black Sea.
- Cadmeans (Kad-mee'-uns): people of Thebes.
- Cadmeia (Kad-mē'-ah): city of Cadmus, a name for Thebes.
- Cadmus (Kad'-mus): legendary founder of Thebes.
- Castalia (Kuh-stay'-ly-ah): spring on Mount Parnassus.
- Creon (Krē'-on): Oedipus' brother-in-law, new king of Thebes.
- Danaa (Da'-nah-ay): one of Zeus's mortal lovers, mother of Perseus.
- Deo (Dē'-ō): a.k.a. Demeter, goddess of grain.
- Dionysus (Dī-uh-nī'-sus): a.k.a. Bacchus, god of wine and revelry.

Dirce (Dur'-sē): stream in the vicinity of Thebes.
 Dryas (Drī'-us): Thracian king, father of Lycurgus, who attacked Dionysus.
 Edonian (E-dō'-nē-un): Thracian.
 Erechtheid (E-rek'-thē-id): descendant of Erechtheus, an early king of Athens.
 Eros (Er'-os): Cupid, sexual love personified.
 Eteocles (Ē-tē'-uh-klēz): son of Oedipus.
 Eurydice (Yū-rid'-uh-sē): Creon's wife.
 Hades (Hā'-dēz): god of the dead.
 Haemon (Hē'-mon): Creon's son.
 Hecate (He'-ka-tē): an underworld goddess.
 Hephaestus (He-fes'-tus): one of the Olympians, god of fire and the forge.
 Ismene (Is-mē'-nē): Antigone's sister.
 Ismenus (Is-mē'-nus): stream in the vicinity of Thebes.
 Labdacid (Lab-dah'-sid): descendant of Labdacus, an early king of Thebes.
 Laius (Lī'-us): Oedipus' father.
 Maenads (Mē'-nads): Bacchantes, women followers of Dionysus.
 Megareus (Me-gair'-ē-us): Creon's dead son.
 Menoeceus (Me-nē'-sē-us): Creon's father.
 Niobe (Nī'-ō-bē): boastful queen of Thebes whose children were slain by Apollo and Artemis.
 Nysaeon (Nī-sē'-un): name applied to hills and mountains sacred to Dionysus.
 Oedipus (E'-duh-pus): king of Thebes who killed his father and married his mother.
 Parnassian (Par-nas'-ē-un): associated with Mount Parnassus, sacred to Apollo and Dionysus.
 Persephone (Per-sef'-ō-nē): goddess of the underworld, married to Hades.
 Phineid (Fin'-ē-id): child of Phineus, a legendary prophet.
 Pluto (Plū-tō): another name for Hades, god of the dead.

Polyneies (Pol-i-nī'-sēz): son of Oedipus.

Salmydessus (Sal-muh-des'-us): city on the coast of the Black Sea.

Sipylus (Si'-puh-lis): mountain in Asia Minor.

Symplegades (Sim-plā'-guh-dēz): the legendary Clashing Rocks at the mouth of the Bosphorus.

Tantalid (Tan'-tuh-lid): child of the infamous sinner Tantalus.

Thebes (Thēbs): city in Greece once ruled by Oedipus.

Thracian (Thrā-shun): associated with Thrace, land on the northern border of Macedonia.

Tiresias (Tī-rē'-sē-us): blind prophet, priest of Apollo.

Zeus (Zūs): king of the gods.

Appendix 2.

Synopses of the Surviving Accounts of Oedipus and His Family

*Oedipus in Homer's *Odyssey* (Eighth Century BCE)*

A bare-bones version of Oedipus' saga appears in Homer's *Odyssey* II.271–80, where Odysseus describes to the Phaeacians his journey to the underworld. There he claims to have seen the ghost of Oedipus' mother, whom he calls Epicasta rather than Jocasta.

She committed a great misdeed because of her mind's ignorance. She gave herself in marriage to her own son, and he married her after he killed his father. Soon the gods made things known to men, and he ruled over the Cadmeans, enduring pain in lovely Thebes, on account of the ruinous decrees of the gods. The woman went to the house of Hades, the strict guard, after she attached a noose to a high ceiling, overcome by sorrow. She left many sorrows behind for the man, the kind that a mother's furies bring to fulfillment. (my translation)

Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes* (467 BCE)

Eteocles tells a crowd of Theban men that it is time for them to serve the city. An infallible priest who relies on the observation of birds, not the examination of sacrificial victims, has revealed that an all-out attack by the enemy is imminent. At Eteocles' command they disperse to take up defensive positions on the walls. A scout enters and reports that the seven enemy leaders have sworn to sack Thebes or spill their own blood in the attempt.

A chorus of Theban maidens enters, terrified by noises emanating from the enemy forces. They beg the gods to keep them safe. Eteocles scolds them for spreading panic. "O Zeus," he says, "what a breed you've given us in women!" He tells them to pray instead that the gods will be their allies in battle, and to promise to sacrifice sheep and dedicate enemy spoils to them once the invaders are crushed. The chorus sings again but continues to dwell on the horrors that ensue when a city is sacked.

A scout appears with information about the seven enemy leaders. The first is Tydeus, best known as the father of Diomedes, one of the great Greek warriors in the *Iliad*. Tydeus carries a shield depicting a full moon in the night sky. Bronze bells dangle from it, making a horrendous racket. He is raging because the army's priest will not let him begin his attack. The second enemy leader is Capaneus, a giant of a man who swears that he will sack the city with or without the gods' help. His shield pictures a naked man carrying a torch. Golden letters announce, "I will burn the city!" As the scout names the gate to which each attacking captain is assigned, Eteocles picks a Theban warrior to oppose each one. The Thebans are described as steadfast and modest.

It turns out that Eteocles' brother Polyneices will attack the seventh gate. On his shield there is a representation of Justice saying, "I shall restore this man." Eteocles says that Polyneices has never in fact had anything to do with Justice and that he himself will stand against him. The chorus asks him to reconsider, to avoid shedding kindred blood, but Eteocles declares that it would be cowardly and disgraceful to avoid the confrontation. As he leaves, the chorus sings about the troubles of Laius and Oedipus. The former disregarded Apollo's warning that he should die without issue. Oedipus blinded himself when he found that he had married his mother; later, when he felt that he had been treated disrespectfully, he cursed his sons, causing them to fight over their inheritance.

A messenger arrives and announces that the city is safe. Its defenders prevailed at each of the gates except the seventh. There Eteocles and Polyneices killed each other

The chorus laments. The bodies of Eteocles and Polyneices are carried in and deposited on the stage, accompanied by Antigone and Ismene.

A herald appears and announces that the people's council have decreed that Eteocles should receive an honorable burial, but that Polyneices' corpse must be left on the ground to rot. Antigone immediately announces that she will not abide by the decree but will bury her brother. Although the herald says that he forbids the action, Antigone and half of the chorus leave in one direction, accompanying Polyneices' body, while the others follow Eteocles'.

Sophocles, *Antigone* (Approximately 441 BCE)

See the Introduction for a synopsis.

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*
(Approximately 425 BCE)

Oedipus' parents were King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes. Learning of an oracle's prediction that he would die at his son's hands, Laius ordered a servant to expose the baby Oedipus on a mountain and drive a spike through his ankles. The servant entrusted with disposing of the baby was known only as Laius' man, a herdsman. Out of pity, he disregarded his orders and gave the baby to a Corinthian herdsman to pass on to foster parents. The Corinthian gave the baby to Corinth's childless royal couple, Polybus and Merope, who raised him as their own and named him Oedipus (Swollen Foot) because of the spike's effects.

Years later a drunken comrade in Corinth accused Oedipus, now a young man, of being illegitimate. Distressed, Oedipus went to the oracle of Delphi to ask who his real parents were. Instead of answering the question, the oracle told Oedipus that he was destined to lie with his mother, "producing unholy offspring," and to slay his father. Oedipus resolved to avoid that fate by never returning to Corinth. He fled from the oracle.

Coming to a crossroads, he turned toward Thebes. Here he met an old man who was traveling with a group of servants. They quarreled over the right of way; the old man swatted him with a goad; and Oedipus threw him out of his chariot and killed him and all of his servants—or so he thought. In fact, there was one survivor: Laius' man. He ran back to Thebes with the story that a band of robbers had killed King Laius and the rest of his attendants.

The citizens could not investigate the murder because a monster, the Sphinx, appeared in the countryside, asking a riddle and killing those who failed to answer it correctly. At

this juncture Oedipus arrived in the city and saved the day. He confronted the Sphinx and answered her riddle, and she killed herself. The Thebans made him their new king. He married the newly widowed queen, Jocasta.

The action of Sophocles' play begins years later. Oedipus and Jocasta are the parents of grown children, two sons and two daughters. A plague is decimating the city. Oedipus' brother-in-law, Creon, goes to Delphi to learn why the gods are angry and is told that Laius' murderer must be punished.

Oedipus agrees to investigate. He questions the old, blind seer Tiresias, who suddenly remembers the truth, which he has been repressing. He says, "I knew these matters well but I / destroyed them. Otherwise I hadn't come." Tiresias tries to refuse to talk. When Oedipus badgers him, Tiresias blurts out that Oedipus himself is the criminal whom he seeks. Oedipus' temper flares. He accuses Tiresias and Creon of using a fake oracle to overthrow him. Later Creon appears to defend himself, but Oedipus treats him scornfully too.

Jocasta enters and soothes Oedipus. Learning that the quarrel concerns oracles, she belittles them, telling Oedipus that an oracle once predicted that her former husband would be killed by his own son. Instead, she says, he was killed by a band of robbers . . . at a crossroads. Her reference to a crossroads disturbs Oedipus. He tells her about the journey that brought him from Corinth to a crossroads where he killed an old man, who fit Laius' description. He sends for Laius' man, hoping that he will confirm his old story about a band of robbers.

While they wait for Laius' man, a Corinthian enters with news for Oedipus. His "father," Polybus, has died of old age, and the citizens of Corinth want to make Oedipus their king. Jocasta and Oedipus are relieved to hear of Polybus' death since it apparently contradicted the oracle's prediction that Oedipus would kill him. Oedipus tells the Corinthian that he cannot return because of the oracle's other prophecy: that he would

marry his mother. Thinking that this information will come as a great relief, the Corinthian informs Oedipus that Polybus and Merope were not his real parents. The Corinthian knows about the adoption because he is none other than the former shepherd who gave baby Oedipus to Polybus. He is, however, unable to tell Oedipus who his real parents were. Only a servant called “Laius’ man” would know that. During these revelations, Jocasta leaves the stage.

Laius’ man finally arrives. Oedipus demands to know who his parents were and threatens the servant with violence if he refuses to talk. Laius’ man reluctantly tells him. Oedipus rushes into the palace, calling for a sword and demanding to see the queen. In an inner room, he finds that she has hanged herself. He removes brooches from her gown and jabs out his eyes. In a final appearance on stage, he says that he should now be sent into exile, but Creon tells him to stay in the palace for the time being. Oedipus exits with the help of his daughters.

Euripides, *The Suppliant Women* (Approximately 423 BCE)

In the brief prologue Theseus’ mother, Aethra, stands before the doors of the temple of Demeter at Eleusis. She is surrounded by suppliants, the mothers of the seven warriors who attacked Thebes. Adrastus, king of Argos, and the warriors’ sons are also present in suppliant postures. Aethra asks the goddess for her blessing and explains that the suppliants are present because the rulers of Thebes are preventing them from burying their fallen sons. Adrastus has asked Aethra to persuade her son, Theseus, to intervene. Out of respect for their supplication, Aethra has summoned Theseus via a herald to deal with their request.

The chorus of mothers sings, renewing their request for Aethra's help and describing their mourning vividly. They and their attendants beat their breasts and scratch their faces until they bleed.

Theseus arrives and asks what is happening. Adrastus rises to make his plea, summarizing the story of his expedition against Thebes. Because of an oracle that his daughters should marry a boar and a lion, he had married his daughters to two young men who were found fighting fiercely outside the palace: Tydeus and Polyneices. He launched the expedition to avenge the wrongs committed against Polyneices by his brother, Eteocles. Omens and oracles were not favorable, and the seer Amphiarus advised against the expedition, but Adrastus was influenced by the clamor of young men.

Theseus replies that he feels, contrary to the views of some, that life is good and that the gods have provided mankind with everything that they need for happiness. Some men, however, cause trouble through greed and pride. Adrastus, he says, seems to be one of those. Why should Theseus deliver him from the consequences of a foolish war?

Adrastus prepares to leave, since his supplication has failed, but then he tries a new argument. Theseus is a descendant on his mother's side of Pelops. He is thus tied to Argos by blood. The chorus of women sings a brief lament, begging Theseus for help.

Aethra asks Theseus to help the suppliants. It violates the laws of the Greeks to deny burial. If Theseus does not help the suppliants, he will seem cowardly—one who performs trivial tasks, like defeating a wild boar, but backs down from serious challenges. He will win glory by helping the suppliants.

Theseus is persuaded. He will first get the consent of the assembled citizens of Athens, whom he has made sovereign. He is confident of their approval, but he will explain his reasons so that he has their good will. Then he will try to persuade the Thebans to surrender the dead bodies. If persuasion does not

work, he will use force. He leaves for Athens, accompanied by his mother, whom he is taking home, and Adrastus, who will help him explain the situation to the assembly.

The chorus hopes and prays that Theseus will restore their sons' bodies.

Theseus returns with Adrastus and an Athenian herald. While he gives the herald a message to deliver in Thebes, a talkative Theban herald arrives, looking for the land's master. Theseus corrects him, saying that the people rule in Athens. The Theban herald ridicules the idea of commoners trying to rule. Theseus responds with a denunciation of tyranny and its effects, concluding with the atrocity of children being forcibly married. He then tells the herald to deliver his message.

The herald demands that Adrastus be barred from entering Athenian territory—or be cast out if he is already present. He urges Theseus not to embroil his city in war, with its attendant evils. He also argues that the seven who attacked Thebes were impious. Zeus's lightning destroyed Capaneus; Amphiaraus was swallowed by the earth.

Theseus prevents Adrastus from replying and addresses the herald himself. He demands that the Thebans allow the dead to be buried and ridicules the idea that they have anything to fear from doing so. If the custom of burying the dead is set aside, men will become cowards. If the Thebans refuse, war will ensue. After trading threats and insults, the herald leaves.

Theseus commands his retinue to start marching, confident because justice and the gods are on his side. Virtue accomplishes nothing without god.

Dividing in two, the chorus prays that the Athenian army will prevail. One half voice their fears; the other half are confident because the gods are on Athens' side.

A messenger arrives from Thebes, Capaneus' attendant. Imprisoned in Thebes, where he watched the battle from a tower, he has gotten away and reports that Theseus won. He

describes the disposition of the infantry, cavalry, and chariots. The last engaged first and were then joined by the cavalry. The battle was even until Theseus charged in wielding his club, with which he started a rout. When the panicky Thebans had crowded inside the city, Theseus declared that he intended no further harm and wanted only the dead Argives. He has brought back the bodies of the captains. The other Argive soldiers have been buried on Citheron near Eleutherae, and not by slaves—Theseus attended to the burial himself. Overcome by loneliness, Adrastus wishes that he had died with his fellow townsmen.

The mothers are glad that Theseus won, but saddened to see their dead sons. They wish that they had never married, since losing sons is so painful. As they sing, Theseus and Adrastus enter with five corpses. The chorus and Adrastus exchange interjections of grief: “Let the earth swallow me up!”

Theseus asks Adrastus to describe the courage of each of the fallen captains. Adrastus describes them with distinctive words of praise: Capaneus was moderate in all things, without airs; Eteoclus was a poor man who held high office and rejected bribes; Hippomedon avoided the Muses and cultivated a harsh, outdoor way of life to make his body useful to his city; Atalanta’s son, Parthenopaeus, was an Arcadian, raised in Argos, loyal to that city, and deferential; Tydeus, though not brilliant in words, was a master of the spear.

The chorus briefly laments the fate of their fallen sons. Theseus announces that Amphiaraus was honored by the gods in death, having been swallowed by the earth. Capaneus will be buried separately, as a corpse sacred to the gods, in a tomb next to the temple of Demeter. The others will be cremated on a common pyre.

When Adrastus suggests that the chorus come close and view their sons, Theseus overrules him, saying that the sight would be too upsetting. After the corpses are burned, their bones will be turned over to their mothers.

The chorus laments their unhappy fate, entering old age with nothing but sorrow. Then the women point out that Evadne has appeared above Capaneus' tomb. She is the daughter of King Iphis and Capaneus' widow.

Instead of speaking, Evadne bursts into song. She recalls the sunshine on her happy wedding day; now she has come to seek a pleasurable death on her loving husband's funeral pyre. That is her journey's end.

Iphis enters. He has come to recover the body of his son Eteocles (one of the seven) and to find his daughter, who stole away when he relaxed the close watch he kept on her. Before the chorus can answer, Evadne calls attention to herself.

Iphis asks what she is doing. She says only that she is seeking a victory in virtue over all women: she is going to join her husband on the pyre. As Iphis tries to forbid her, she leaps.

Iphis is cast into deep despair. If he had known the pain of losing children, he would never have had them. Once he enjoyed visiting Evadne in Capaneus' house; now there is nothing for him to do but go home and starve. He curses old age and those who try to prolong life. The old should die and get out of the way of the young.

Theseus has entered with the bones. He urges Adrastus to keep the memory of Athenian kindness alive in Argos. Adrastus assures him that the Argives will never forget; he prays that Athens will continue to fare well.

Athena appears and tells Theseus to make Adrastus swear a solemn oath that Argos will never invade Athens and will help repel others who do. The oath is to be sanctified by sacrificing three sheep over a special bronze tripod obtained by Heracles from Troy and passed on to Theseus. The oath must be inscribed on the tripod and the tripod given to Delphi for safe keeping. The knife used to sacrifice the sheep should be buried. If the Argives ever attempt to invade, the knife will scare them away.

Turning to the sons of the seven, Athena tells them that they will avenge their fathers' deaths. Adrastus' son, Aegialeus, will lead them, joined by Tydeus' son, Diomedes.

Theseus tells Athena that he will obey. The choruses and Adrastus depart for the city to take the requested oath.

Euripides, *The Phoenician Women* (Approximately 408 BCE)

Jocasta delivers the prologue, setting the scene, although there is no dramatic context for her speech. She identifies herself as the daughter of Menoeceus, as Creon's sister, and as Laius' wife. After years of childlessness, he consulted Phoebus and was told not to beget any children, because if he did, his son would kill him. Later, flushed with wine, he begot a son. When the baby was born, he drove a spike through the baby's ankles and gave him to herdsmen to expose in Hera's Meadow on Mount Citheron. Polybus' horseherders found the baby and gave him to their queen.

Later Oedipus went to Delphi to ask about his parents' identity; at the same time Laius left Thebes seeking assurance that his child was dead. They met at a crossroads near the road to Phocis. Laius' charioteer ordered Oedipus to step aside. The chariot's horses bloodied Oedipus' ankles with their hooves. Oedipus killed Laius and gave the chariot to Polybus. Later Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx and married Jocasta. They had four children, two sons and two daughters.

When Oedipus learned the truth about Jocasta, he destroyed his eyes. His sons kept him locked away. He cursed them, wishing that they might divide their inheritance with a sword. To avoid that fate, the younger Polyneices went voluntarily

into exile for a year. At the end of that year, Eteocles refused to give up the throne. Polyneices married the daughter of Adrastus of Argos.

Now Polyneices has come to Thebes with an army. Hoping to avert bloodshed, Jocasta has arranged for her sons to meet under a truce.

An elderly servant leads Antigone to the palace roof to view the Argive army. He identifies the captains for her—Hippomedon, Tydeus, Parthenopaeus, Polyneices himself, Adrastus, Amphiaras, and Capaneus—but urges her to hurry back inside. Some women are coming, and women are fond of scandal.

A chorus of Phoenician maidens enters. Gifts to Apollo from their native city of Tyre, they are en route to Delphi where they will serve as temple slaves, but they have been delayed in Thebes by the imminent battle. Their sympathies lie with Thebes because of common ancestry: its founder, Cadmus, was a Phoenician prince.

Polyneices enters fearfully, induced by his mother's invitation. He asks the chorus who they are and identifies himself in turn. The chorus excitedly summons Jocasta, who arrives and greets Polyneices with a song ("I drag an aged foot"). She is thrilled to embrace him but rebukes him for contracting a foreign marriage in which she played no part.

Polyneices explains his situation: he was a starving exile, longing for his home, when chance brought him to Adrastus' palace. There he and Tydeus fought over a resting place. An oracle had instructed Adrastus to marry his daughters to a lion and a boar. Seeing Tydeus and Polyneices fighting, he assumed that they were his fated sons-in-law. Because of the marriage alliance, he took steps to restore each to his native city, starting with Polyneices. To that end, Polyneices is present with Danaan and Mycenaean allies.

Eteocles arrives, saying that he has come in response to Jocasta's desire for a mediation. Jocasta asks the brothers to speak directly to each other and invites Polyneices to explain his side of the story. He says that no rhetorical embellishment is needed. To avoid fulfilling Oedipus' curse, he is ready to live in Thebes and rule in alternate years—the arrangement to which Eteocles once consented.

Eteocles replies that he has tyrannical power now and will not surrender it. It would not be manly to give up the more desirable thing for something less so. Polyneices can live in Thebes, but only if Eteocles retains power.

Jocasta asks Eteocles to reconsider. Even the sun and the moon yield to each other in turn. It is equality, not power, that produces happiness. Wealth is fleeting. It is only loaned to us by the gods. As for Polyneices, she tells him that he could not possibly take any pride or satisfaction in having destroyed his own city.

Polyneices and Eteocles trade threats and insults. Eteocles even dismisses Polyneices' request to see his maiden sisters. Polyneices calls on his native earth to witness this mistreatment and prays that he will gain control of the land of Thebes. Eteocles tells him to leave. He is well named, a man of much (*poly*) strife (*neikos*).

Creon arrives just as Eteocles orders an attendant to summon him. Eteocles tells Creon that the parley with Polyneices was useless. They discuss strategy, with Creon urging caution, since they are outnumbered. He reports that the enemy is going to launch attacks on the city's seven gates, led by seven captains. They agree to appoint seven Thebans to counter these attacks.

Eteocles approves the planned wedding between his sister Antigone and Haemon, Creon's son. If he is killed, he forbids Creon to allow Polyneices to be buried in Theban soil; anyone

who buries him, no matter how near and dear, must die. He also tells Creon to have his son Menoeceus bring the prophet Tiresias to see if he has any oracles to share. Eteocles remarks that since he has mocked the seer's art in the past, it would be better for Creon to speak with him.

Tiresias arrives, guided by a girl and accompanied by Menoeceus. Worn out by the journey, he says that he would have withheld his prophecies from Eteocles, but will speak to Creon. Thebes has been cursed since Laius defied the gods by begetting a son. Now there is only one way to save the city, but Tiresias is unwilling to say what it is.

Creon insists on hearing the key to salvation. Tiresias asks him to send Menoeceus away first, but Creon refuses. The seer then reveals that Menoeceus must die, an expiation for the death of Ares' dragon. His sacrifice will bring Ares over to the side of Thebes.

Tiresias leaves, saying that he must reveal his prophecy to the other Thebans; it would be unjust not to. It is useless to be a prophet, he mourns: people hate you for delivering bad news, but lying to spare people's feelings offends the gods.

Creon urges Menoeceus to flee far away, suggesting a journey that will take him to Dodona. Menoeceus seems to agree, but first he wishes to see his aunt, Jocasta, who nursed him when he was a motherless child.

With Creon gone, Menoeceus reveals that he was deceiving his father. He will not be a coward, but will give his life for his country. If more people were willing to do so, cities would be more prosperous.

The chorus recounts the horrors of the Sphinx's attacks, snatching young men from Dirce's meadows.

A messenger arrives from the front, calling to Jocasta. She emerges and asks whether her sons are alive. The messenger assures her that they are and describes the battle. After Menoeceus climbed a tower and slew himself for his country's

sake, driving a sword through his throat, Eteocles dispatched cohorts to defend each gate. Arrayed against the gates were Parthenopaeus, Amphiarus, Hippomedon, Tydeus, Polyneices, Capaneus, and Adrastus. Poseidon's son Periclymenus crushed Parthenopaeus' head with a boulder. Tydeus charged, but Eteocles rallied his troops against him. Capaneus, scaling the walls on a ladder, was smitten by Zeus's lightning. Seeing this, Adrastus pulled his troops back.

The messenger concludes by saying that the city is safe for the time being, but Jocasta insists on knowing her sons' intentions. The messenger reluctantly tells her: Eteocles challenged Polyneices to single combat to settle their dispute, and Polyneices accepted. The two warriors are arming. If Jocasta is to prevent them from killing each other, the time to act is now.

Jocasta summons Antigone and explains the situation. The two exit to the battlefield to try to prevent the conflict.

Creon enters, mourning Menoeceus. A messenger arrives with the news that Polyneices and Eteocles have killed each other, and, worse, Jocasta is dead. According to the messenger's detailed account, Polyneices and Eteocles lost their spears and turned to grappling with swords. Eteocles, drawing back, fainted and then stabbed Polyneices, driving the sword through his stomach. As Eteocles stripped off his brother's armor, Polyneices stabbed him in the heart.

Jocasta arrived at this moment and began to weep. The dying Eteocles "spoke to her with tears from his eyes, to signify love." Polyneices actually spoke, saying that he pitied his mother, sister, and brother: "A loved one, he became an enemy, but a loved one nonetheless." He also asked that she and Antigone see that he is buried in Thebes.

Jocasta, hearing all this, stabbed herself in the throat. The two armies argued about who won and then rushed to arms. Having routed the attackers, some of the Thebans are now

stripping the arms from the fallen enemy and bringing them into the city. Antigone and others are bringing back the fallen brothers and Jocasta in order to mourn them.

Antigone arrives, singing a lamentation for her mother and brothers. She summons Oedipus outside the palace, and he joins her lament, without mentioning the connection between his curse and his sons' deaths.

Creon appears and announces that Oedipus must go into exile: Tiresias says that Thebes's troubles will never end so long as Oedipus is present. Creon orders that Eteocles' body be taken inside and prepared for burial, while Polyneices' must stay outside to rot, in keeping with Eteocles' wishes.

Antigone, clinging to the corpse, says that she will bury Polyneices herself. When Creon refers to her forthcoming marriage to Haemon, Antigone raises Polyneices' sword and threatens to kill Haemon on their wedding night if she is forced to marry him. She wishes to go into exile with her father instead. Creon tells her to go then and exits.

Oedipus and Antigone lament. Oedipus knows that he is fated to die in Athens and that Colonus will receive him. Antigone says that she will secretly bury her brother, even if she has to die. It is unclear how she intends to do that while at the same time accompanying her father in exile. Oedipus' final words are that he has fallen from greatness to a piteous state but must bear sufferings sent by the gods.

Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* (Approximately 405 BCE)

Homeless wanderers, the blind Oedipus and his daughter Antigone arrive in Athenian territory. Oedipus sits on a rock. A local Athenian asks him to leave, since he is in an area that is

sacred to the Furies. Oedipus replies that he must stay there. Then, learning that the king of the land is Theseus, he asks the Athenian to summon him. The Athenian says that he will summon other citizens to consider the request.

When the Athenian leaves, Oedipus tells Antigone about a prophecy that he must end his life in an area sacred to the Furies. He will be a blessing to those who receive him, a curse to those who drive him away.

A chorus of local Athenians arrives and persuades Oedipus to leave the sacred spot temporarily. They press him to reveal his name. Since they have heard his story, they are horrified when he identifies himself; they want him to leave the region. When Oedipus and Antigone beg for compassion, however, the Athenians agree to wait for the arrival of Theseus.

Oedipus' other daughter, Ismene, arrives on horseback, bringing news from Thebes. While Antigone has accompanied Oedipus on his wanderings, Ismene has remained behind in the city. Oedipus' sons, who originally planned to let Creon rule, are feuding over royal power. The younger, Eteocles, has seized power by winning popular favor. Driven into exile, the elder, Polyneices, has married and made alliances in the region of Mycenae and hopes to conquer Thebes. Meanwhile, oracles speak of the importance of Oedipus in the imminent conflict. For this reason Creon is on his way to ask Oedipus to come back and live just across the Theban border—in order to honor the oracles without incurring pollution.

Oedipus recalls that when he first discovered the secret of his identity, he wanted to die. Later, when he wished to live normally, he was driven out of the city, and his sons did nothing to help him; nor have they done anything for him subsequently. Only his daughters have acted like men. Oedipus is determined not to help either of his sons.

Members of the chorus say that libations must be poured to the Furies to placate them for Oedipus' violation of the grove.

Ismene volunteers for the task and is directed to the far side of the grove for water.

Theseus arrives and asks Oedipus what favor he seeks. It is to be buried in Athens—and Oedipus says that fulfilling his request will benefit the city. His spirit will lead Athens to victory over Thebes if those cities ever go to war, which means that Creon and Oedipus' sons may try to seize him to prevent his burial in Athens. Theseus assures him that he will not allow Oedipus to be taken.

After a choral interlude in which the site of the action is identified as Colonus, a suburb of Athens, Antigone announces that Creon is coming. Arriving, he declares that all the Theban people want Oedipus to return and that it is a shame for Antigone to lead such a wretched life. Oedipus refuses, emphasizing again that he was driven into exile when he wanted to stay in Thebes. Creon then reveals that his men have seized Ismene. Worse, he orders the seizure of Antigone. She is dragged off stage amid screams and wails.

Theseus orders the Athenian army to assemble to save the sisters and scolds Creon for his illegal behavior. Creon's defense—that he did not think that Athens would want to protect a man guilty of patricide and incest—draws a furious rebuttal from Oedipus. How can he be held responsible for crimes that were prophesied before he was even conceived? Laius was trying to kill him at the crossroads. If someone tried to kill you, he asks Creon, would you defend yourself, or would you ask him first whether he was your father? Theseus interrupts the diatribe to take action. He leaves with Creon to catch the Thebans who have the girls.

The chorus predicts that Theseus and his men will succeed. As their song ends, Theseus delivers the sisters back into Oedipus' arms. After they embrace, Theseus tells Oedipus that a man from the south has assumed a suppliant position at an altar of Poseidon and seeks to speak with him. Oedipus realizes

that it is his son Polyneices. He does not want to listen to him, but Theseus and Antigone persuade him to do so.

Polyneices arrives bewailing his own misfortunes and those of Oedipus. After Eteocles gained power in Thebes by winning over the people, Polyneices raised an army in Argos consisting of seven leaders, including himself. Oracles indicate that victory will belong to the side that Oedipus favors. If Polyneices wins, he will restore Oedipus to Thebes. All he wants is Oedipus' forgiveness.

Oedipus replies that he is willing to talk to Polyneices only as a favor to Theseus. Polyneices and Eteocles are responsible for Oedipus' sorry condition. He curses them both, predicting that they will kill each other in battle.

Polyneices' hopes are crushed. He asks Antigone to see that he is properly buried if Oedipus' curse is fulfilled, while she begs him to give up his attack on Thebes. Polyneices declares that he could not do anything so cowardly. When she asks who will follow him after people hear about Oedipus' curse, he answers that, as a good general, he will conceal the truth. They part in tears.

Thunder sounds. Saying that it signals his death, Oedipus asks to speak to Theseus, who returns. Oedipus will lead Theseus alone to the secret place where the exiled king will die. Knowledge of this location and other secrets will keep Athens safe from attack by Thebes. Though blind, Oedipus leads Theseus and his daughters into the sacred grove. After a brief choral interlude, a messenger returns with the news that Oedipus is gone, having led the group to a basin, where he bathed and said farewell to his daughters. "Everything that was me has perished," he said. "You will no longer have the trouble of caring for me. I know how difficult it was, children, but one word alone dissolves all those troubles: love. The man does not exist who loved you more." After a tearful farewell, he sent them away.

When the group looked back from a distance, the messenger adds, Oedipus was gone, and Theseus stood shielding his eyes as though from some dreadful sight. “Either it was a messenger sent by the gods or a power from below split the earth. He passed away without pain or disease, a marvelous end if ever a mortal’s was.”

The girls lament. Antigone asks Theseus to show her Oedipus’ grave, but he refuses. The girls decide to return to Thebes to try to prevent their brothers from killing each other.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Historical Background

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- Tyrrell, William Blake, and Larry J. Bennett. *Recapturing Sophocles' "Antigone."* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998. An interpretation of the play with focus on the relevant attitudes and assumptions of the original audience.

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- Gregory, Justina, ed. *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. Essays by leading scholars on a wide range of topics.
- Pickard-Cambridge, Arthur. *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968. A comprehensive treatment of the City Dionysia and lesser dramatic festivals based directly on primary sources.
- Rehm, Rush. *Greek Tragic Theatre*. London: Routledge, 1992. An engaging introduction to the Greek tragic theater, with attention to archaeological as well as literary evidence and also interesting speculation about stage effects.
- Storey, Ian C., and Arlene Allan. *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*. Blackwell Guides to Classical Literature. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004. A good general introduction to Greek drama and some current scholarly debates.

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- Gantz, Timothy. *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. An exhaustive study of myths and legends, including

that of Oedipus, as found in Archaic literary and artistic sources.

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- Scodel, Ruth. *Sophocles*. Boston: Twayne, 1984. A concise summary of what is known about Sophocles and a play-by-play analysis of his work by an excellent scholar.

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David Mulroy is professor of classics at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. He has translated *The Complete Poetry of Catullus* and *Oedipus Rex*, both published by the University of Wisconsin Press.

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